

BREAKING NEWS:

MERRIFIELD: Neglecting the arts hurts our children

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I know that "retro" is in, but do we really want to return to the bad old days of education when many districts slashed arts programs in an often-failed effort to boost test scores?

In "Arts are wonderful, but this study isn't" (Oct. 12), the *Rocky Mountain News* argues against a recent study of the arts in schools, saying it is not scientific and therefore should be discounted because it had "only" a 25 percent response rate. In this age of polling 1,033 voters to reveal what millions are thinking, a one-in-four response has self-evident credibility. Moreover, I take issue with the *Rocky's* interpretation of the study itself.

I recently said that the hoary "three R's" have sadly come to mean "rigor, regimentation and regurgitation." As chairman of the state's House Education Committee, I am committed to the teaching of so-called "core" subjects, but they must not come at the expense of the arts.

In fact, an article that ran the same day as the above-mentioned editorial is headlined "Arts may lift performance" (at Denver's Kunsmiller Creative Arts Academy, where kids learn core subjects while also studying music, drama, dance and visual arts).

In Colorado Springs, urban, low-income third-graders at Bristol Elementary have had three years of violin lessons, and 76 percent of them scored proficient or advanced on the CSAP reading tests compared to the prior year's third-graders who reached only 52 percent.

Despite this evidence and plain old common sense, more than one out of four administrators in Colorado admit they have cut funding from "noncore" arts, humanities, social studies and physical education to provide more resources for subject areas tested on CSAP.

Parents aren't happy about these backward steps: In the last five years, the number of Americans who believe that too much emphasis is placed on testing jumped by 12 percent. One-half of Americans are concerned about President Bush's No Child Left Behind program, feeling that its focus on reading and math has reduced instructional time in other subjects.

Kids who participate in the arts for three hours a week for one year are:

- * Four times more likely to be recognized for academic achievement.
- * Three times more likely to be elected to class office within their schools.
- * Three times more likely to win an award for school attendance.
- * Four times more likely to participate in a math and science fair.

Students of lower socioeconomic status who took music lessons in grades 8-12 increased their math scores on national tests significantly compared to nonmusic students. They also outscored all other students on the SATs.

A 2005 Stanford University study reveals "that musical experience improves the way people's brains process . . . speech and, consequently, may affect the acoustic and phonetic skills needed for learning language and reading."

The Salt Lake City School District reported that in the four school years ending 2003 to 2006, students in arts programs outscored other students on the state's math test by a range of 16 to 26 points on a 100-point scale.

As the recent well-received study called "Tough Choices Tough Times" said, "Success in the future will depend on creativity and innovation, teamwork, abstract thinking and self-discipline." All these skills are gained through the study of the arts.

So, sure, let's focus on the CSAP-tested skills of reading, writing and arithmetic. But let's also give the

next generation the gift of creativity and collaboration, abstraction and the arts.

Democratic Rep. Michael Merrifield represents Colorado Springs.