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OPINION

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Arts or academics: Why not both?

By Tracy Stevens

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A recent study by the Colorado Council on the Arts showed a correlation between arts and learning, revealing schools with more art programs had higher proficiency in writing, reading and science.

This is counter-intuitive and often at odds with the way schools build their curriculum, stressing more time with the basics and ever-earlier acquisition of literacy at the expense of the arts.

Frequently the poorer school districts are the most likely to take a back-to-the-basics approach to learning, removing the arts with exactly the consequences the planners were trying to avoid.

Not only are the arts enjoyable, extensive research has shown that arts education significantly boosts neurological, social, emotional and intellectual development.

When the arts are integrated with other subjects, it provides a meaningful frame of reference to help learn academic material, and it provides a bridge to disparate subjects to make learning a whole experience.

It also encourages creativity and innovation, skills that are already in high demand in the work world. It is imperative that we offer a public education with a rich curriculum filled with abundant opportunities for each child to find ways to shine and succeed.

Doing so will help boost attention, achievement, graduation rates, and teacher satisfaction and will attract private school students back to the public schools.

Kunsmiller Creative Arts Academy (K-12) will be opening on the west side of Denver (in the current Kunsmiller Middle School building). It will be headed up by Dr. Diana Howard, former principal of Polaris at Ebert, a very successful school with integrated arts throughout their curriculum.

Under her leadership, the students at Kunsmiller will not only experience art as a bridge to all subjects in their studies, they will also have two daily sessions of art focused learning with art professionals. Each student will gain experience in drama, visual arts, dance, and music throughout the year.

The Kunsmiller admission policy will be based on interest and a regional lottery, not by portfolio or audition.

The students in the neighborhoods that Kunsmiller serves are so fortunate to have this option available to them. What's needed is more of these kinds of public schools throughout Denver, and for that matter the entire country.

A cursory look at Denver's private schools show a commonality of curriculums that our public schools do not often share. They all go well beyond the basics and teach to the whole child. They do not solely focus on the core academics, but seek to draw out the best in their children academically, socially, emotionally, creatively, and physically.

Their arts programs are not add-ons, but thoroughly integrated with the curriculum. Rather than heavy reliance on textbooks and worksheets they tend to offer experiential learning opportunities.

Many of these schools require the students to create the books used in the classroom, writing and illustrating them to chronicle their educational journey over the course of a year.

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illustrating them to chronicle their educational journey over the course of a year.

For Denver Public Schools to compete with these private schools, they too will need to teach to the whole child, not just the parts that may improve test scores.

Tracy Stevens writes a blog on education, which can be viewed at <http://abettereducation.blogspot.com/>.

EDITOR'S NOTE: This is an online-only column and has not been edited.