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Art for art's sake

Educators: Creative students are more well-rounded and more in demand by employers.

By JOHN NORTON
THE PUEBLO CHIEFTAIN

Educators, facing the need to concentrate on the subjects that show up in standardized tests, have long complained that a more rounded educational program makes their jobs easier and keeps kids in school longer.

On Monday, the Colorado Department of Education joined with the Colorado Council on the Arts to back up that claim with data from a statewide survey.

Their report ties arts education to both higher academic achievement and lower dropout rates. Importantly, that correlation runs evenly across geography, ethnicity and family income.

The Colorado Council on the Arts is a division of the Colorado Office of Economic Development and International Trade. Elaine Mariner, the council's executive director, said that the skills children learn in arts classes are important to the state's ability to attract jobs. She called the lack of arts programs "alarming," adding that businesses expect high school graduates to be creative. "These are the critical skills we need to be competitive globally."

In the short term, she said, the arts are an effective way to spark interest in school. "For many students, the arts can be the crucial connection that motivates them to learn and gives them the confidence to tackle what can be challenging subjects, such as math or science," Mariner said. She said that 53 percent of high school students do not take any arts classes at all.

Mariner acknowledged that part of the problem could be the way arts classes are taught, rewarding talent that not all students might possess and discouraging others. "Couldn't we find some opportunities where students could take arts classes in a way that doesn't use talent as the primary criteria for assessment? That it's about creativity."

The education department and the arts council offered four recommendations Monday:

Adding an arts requirement for principal certification so that administrators understand how to incorporate arts into their curriculum.

Requiring arts in high school for admission to state colleges and universities.

Adding an arts education subcommittee to the governor's P-20 Commission studying education from preschool to graduate school.

Look at teacher education programs with the intent of including creative learning practices.

More than half of Colorado high schools require arts for graduation. Taking an arts class is not a requirement for Pueblo City Schools graduates but it's likely most will have taken some instruction in visual or performing arts before graduation, said Brenda Krage, executive director of secondary education. "Arts are included in electives. It's not a requirement but you can see there are a lot of credits required."

Graduation requirements were revised this year and Krage said that the issue came up in the meetings of the committee that worked on it.

"There was a lot of discussion about having arts required, but even the arts group itself realized the diversity. They didn't want to say, 'Everybody has to have a dance class,' for example. They just wanted the general area of arts required."

The study said that most public schools in the state offer some formal arts education - 93 percent in elementary grades, 86 percent in middle school and 83 percent in high school.

While art and singing still show up in elementary in Pueblo City Schools classrooms, instrumental music was eliminated in recent years as part of major budget cuts. A mill levy increase on the Nov. 4 ballot will provide funds, district officials say, to restore arts at the elementary level.

According to the study, elementary students on average get two hours of formal arts education a week from mostly experienced, certified teachers. Because middle and high school students have different teachers for different classes, it was hard to see just how many were taking arts classes.

The biggest problem schools have in providing arts classes, surveyed teachers say, is time. Nearly 75 percent said that priority goes to math, reading, writing and other subjects while funding has declined for the arts.

The full study can be found on the Colorado Council on the Arts Web page.

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Colorado Council on the Arts: <http://www.coloarts.org/>