

What is Music and the Arts' Place in the Real Mission of our Education System?



"Our Public Schools will provide an excellent education that prepares our students for college and to earn high paying jobs."

I came across this (very real) school mission statement recently. While it is, in my opinion, egregiously one-dimensional, there are thousands more identical to it out there.

For argument's sake, let's pretend that the goal of every school is *nothing more* than to prepare students for college and "high paying jobs". Where do the arts fit in to the plan? How can parents, teachers, and communities effectively advocate for the arts without sounding too abstract and

"hoity-toity" in the face of such black-and-white school mission statements?

Here are a few points of emphasis when it comes to music and arts education as a part of our schools' missions, and some ways to address the "educating from the neck up" approach of most K-12 schools in our nation:

Schools must define what "critical thinking skills" actually are. *Critical thinking* has been a buzz term in education for what seems like forever. Educators and administrators constantly pay lip service to its importance, but most fail to effectively describe how they teach and test it. With all the emphasis on critical thinking skills, no state tests (including the SAT and ACT) effectively assess these skills yet.

If we are to simplify the definition of critical thinking as *being curious about why things are the way they are and thinking about why something is important*, we can see why the arts play such a vital role in cultivating this skill.

When taught well, it is *impossible* not to incorporate critical thinking into everyday music and arts lessons. Encouraging abstract, non-linear thinking and approaches to problem solving that enables students to make connections among seemingly unrelated concepts is the cornerstone of arts education, and exactly what schools are looking to do with

critical thinking skills in all subjects.

School leaders must recognize the actual skills children need for the global workforce. The only redeeming quality of the mission statement at the beginning of this post is that it lays it all out there — this particular school's goal is to prepare kids for college and the workforce — no bones about it. Whether they admit it or not in their mission statement, most K-12 schooling, in fact, has become nothing more than an elongated college entrance game. If our communities really must accept this depressing fact (we shouldn't, by the way), then let's at least consider this: A large amount of students go to college to study the arts, music and other creative endeavors. Many will also find success in other majors such as engineering or programming by thinking creatively about them — so the arts *still* must be a cornerstone of their K-12 education.

In reality, we don't send our kids to school each day with the sole purpose of having them trained for a job. Even if some of us do, let's admit that the number of jobs available to them later will increase based on their exposure to different skills, experiences and people. The workforce needs people who are used to thinking creatively with the "other" side of their brain. Even if it is true, somehow, that music does not "make you smarter", it certainly is true that music enriches your life and therefore makes you a better person. And being a better person prepares you better for life and, most likely, a better job.

Without motivated students, schools will accomplish *absolutely nothing*. Let's face it: the threat of not passing tests and receiving a diploma is not enough to scare students into being motivated to learn. Educational leaders should do everything in their power to create an environment that enables students to enjoy learning and want to continue in school.

If every school in the nation only offered courses that helped students meet state and federal standards, where would our children be? How would they have the tools to think creatively and innovate? What would that school look like and how would it be received by each community where it resides? Schools that cultivate great thinkers who think outside the box are schools with leaders who do the same. Music and arts courses motivate students to come to school in the first place, and motivated students have a better opportunity to learn and grow in a school setting.

If a school system's *only* goal is to prepare students for the job market, the arts still

play a vital role. At the very least, [up to 10% of the US population makes a living in the arts](#) — and I would argue that it is closer to 30% if you include teachers of the arts, designers, multimedia professionals and anyone else who must think creatively to do their job well.

Every time we enjoy a great artist, musician, video game, television show, play, or the like — we are enjoying the fruits of a creative thinker's labor who may not have gained their skill sets in public school. They most likely had to participate in extracurricular activities to gain those skills. My own children are learning amazing things like coding, oboe, violin, martial arts, and outdoor skills through *paid* activities *beyond* the school day. In some ways, I often think they may be becoming more successful people *despite* their schooling. I'm lucky to be able to afford these activities for my kids, but how is it going to pan out for millions of socioeconomically disadvantaged families who can't afford these activities that are seen merely as "special", "frill", or "enrichment" by school leaders?

While the world continues to dramatically change, our education system remains relatively stagnant. Businesses want young people who can do more than add up a string of numbers and write a coherent sentence; they must be able to solve problems, communicate ideas and be sensitive to the world around them, for starts. Our global economy demands a progressive and creative workforce; creativity and curiosity will be crucial characteristics of successful people. Participation in the arts during each and every school day is one of the best ways to develop these traits.

Students need far more from school than learning how to get into college and securing a high paying job. Never mind that the arts and its related businesses are responsible for billions of dollars in cultural exports for this country, the arts as a core part of our children's education is a common sense solution to preparing our children to have the desire and curiosity to pursue knowledge far beyond school walls.