

Arts have important place in education

by Sharon Burrill, Principal of the Ivan G. Smith Elementary School

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Think back to your years in school. What is your fondest memory? For many people, it's a particular role in a play, a favorite field trip, or a year with a teacher who made learning especially creative. One reason for that may be that your experience connected to the arts. The arts are filled with emotion, and it is often during those peaks of emotion when learning takes place that remains with us. Many districts have had to reduce or eliminate music, art or physical education classes, both core curriculum and extracurricular programs. But in Danvers, we are fortunate to have a rich variety of fine and applied art programs and resources within our schools.

Through research and daily observation, we know that children often learn best through a multi-sensory approach. Integrating the arts into our core curriculum acknowledges that students learn differently; some are auditory learners, others grasp things visually or respond best to tactile examples. Regardless, everyone benefits from a combination of learning experiences.

Traditional education in schools has often delivered the arts separately from classroom curriculum. Today, classroom teachers are working with specialist teachers to incorporate the arts into the curriculum at each grade level, and across subjects. This collaboration has resulted in the creation of lessons that:

- develop deeper levels of knowledge
- improve teaching practices
- engage students
- foster a more positive learning atmosphere

This comprehensive arts dynamic is occurring throughout the district as teachers of many subjects contemplate how to incorporate the arts for meaningful student learning. Discovering connections between student passions and curriculum often provides an ideal path for student learning.

Across the district, teachers are finding creative ways to incorporate the arts into their daily teaching:

- Kindergarten classes use lessons filled with music and movement to review their beginning letter sounds. By performing a particular movement that represents an initial letter (i.e. sitting for "s"), they could correspond their auditory comprehension to a picture of someone sitting.
- Second-graders explore mirror symmetry through a math lesson. Working with the art teacher, students' abilities to represent the symmetry were strengthened as they created African ceremonial masks, learning how to flip one side of the mask to complement the other.
- Fourth-grade classes learn their multiplication tables by setting them to the music of familiar children's songs (Old MacDonald, etc.).

- Fifth-graders present the Revolutionary War through a musical timeline where small groups of students substitute the words to popular music with the facts of a battle or event.

Arts integration cultivates critical thinking as well as empathy, and promotes creativity. Current research shows that a balance of these skills, along with traditional analytical skills, helps best prepare our students for future responsibilities. Increasingly, through our work with the arts, we see more engaged students and teachers, and positive learning atmospheres. This environment can be especially helpful when a particular aspect of a lesson may be difficult for students to grasp.

Consider the performance element provided by student participation in elementary school assemblies. These assemblies give students the opportunity to write, act, film and sing using information they have gathered on holidays such as Veterans Day, Martin Luther King Day and Memorial Day. Concerts, including fourth- and fifth-grade band and chorus, and school plays at each grade level, are also rites of passage in elementary school and are often eagerly anticipated by the rest of the school.

As students move from elementary to the Holten-Richmond Middle School, opportunities exist to take part in annual theatrical productions both onstage, as a performer, or backstage, creating scenery and lighting. Chorus and concert band also continue into middle school, with the addition of a jazz band for seventh- and eighth-grade students. These are just a few of the options that help shape the presentation skills critical for our children's success in today's society.

At Danvers High School, the arts are cultivated even further as students pursue a range of interests spanning curriculum options and extracurricular commitments. There are a variety of Visual Arts courses, including Studio Arts, Photography, Graphic Arts, Ceramics, and Advanced Placement Portfolio Art. Music courses encompass the Choruses, Theatre Arts, Band, and Advanced Placement Music Theory. Through the award-winning Danvers Academy Theatre and Falcon Marching Band, students discover common interests and the importance of working collaboratively.

The Danvers Cultural Council is one of the many organizations that recognize the importance of exposing all our students to the arts as they annually subsidize field trip costs and cultural enrichment presentations across the district through grant awards. In addition, local businesses make strong contributions to the arts year after year. Fundraisers continue to supplement many materials, resources, and opportunities for our children to participate in the arts across town. Finally, we all know parents and volunteers who serve endless hours to coach, supervise, and cheer on our young artists. Thank you, Danvers, for your support! By continuing to infuse the arts into their learning, our children's education will be richer, and their skills, perspectives, and knowledge stronger.