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EDUCATION

The arts are as vital as math

Educators shouldn't have to defend it

Bob Morrison *Guest Columnist*

In a recent article in NJ Spotlight a quote jumped out at me: "I hope I live to see the day when we don't have to advocate for the importance of an arts education," said Dennis Argul, music supervisor in Elizabeth schools.

That statement gave me pause. Argul is correct, we should not have to sell the importance of the arts. After all, we do not see public outrage when a math program is threatened. Of course, we do not see math programs threatened or language arts for that matter. So why do the arts often find themselves in a defensive position?

The answer is simple: The role of arts education in our schools is misunderstood.

There is a misconception that the arts in our schools are for the gifted and talented students, or those who wish to become artists. Nothing could be further from the truth.

We do not teach the arts to create the next generation of artists any more than we teach math to create the next generation of mathematicians, or language arts to create the next generation of authors. We teach our children the arts to create well-rounded citizens who may apply these skills, knowledge and experience to their careers.

For example:

In his famous Stanford commencement address, Steve Jobs credits an arts class for the inspiration to develop elegant fonts on the Macintosh. In a blog post titled "In Defense of Music Education," Jef Raskin credits the arts as the inspiration for the development of the personal computer. And former President Bill Clinton famously said, "I do not think I would have become president if it were not for school music."

These three did not study the arts with the intention to create beautiful typography, develop the personal computer or as a strategy to become president. Their engagement in the arts gave them tools they would use to become successful in life.

That is why it is crucial to note that arts education is for all students, and while most students will go on to jobs outside of the arts, they benefit greatly from the skill set they will be equipped with by being engaged in the arts.

In New Jersey, the public agrees. A Rutgers/Eagleton Statewide Public Opinion Survey this past Septem-

ber found that nine in 10 New Jersey residents agree that receiving an education in the arts — which includes lessons in dance, music, theatre, visual arts, media arts and other forms of creativity — is "very" or "somewhat" important in the classroom (90 percent), through before or after school programs (93 percent), and through cultural organizations in their community (89 percent).

Furthermore, New Jerseyans believe that arts education can help students "a lot" in becoming more creative and imaginative (87 percent), building confidence (81 percent), improving communication skills (74 percent), becoming more tolerant of other cultures (73 percent), developing discipline and perseverance (69 percent), improving overall academic performance (60 percent), or gaining workforce readiness and career skills (53 percent).

That is why when programs are threatened, the public turns out.

In New Jersey, more than one million students engage in the arts in New Jersey schools each year, with arts participation rising from 66 percent of all students in 2006 to 80 percent in 2017 — an all-time high, according to the latest School Performance Reports as analyzed by Arts Ed NJ.

Moreover, 53 percent of high school students are now participating in the arts — up from 47 percent just four years ago. And nearly every school in the state now provides some form of arts education as part of the regular school day.

Most importantly arts education has been a required subject as part of the New Jersey Student Learning Standards since 1996.

Yet, many of our arts educators still feel they need to "justify" what they do.

By working to engage all students with high-quality arts education across the state, we are giving our students more opportunities to use their creative voice and providing them with skills that will help them be successful beyond high school.

And by recognizing and acknowledging the overall educational contribution of the arts to our schools, our more than 7,000 arts educators will no longer feel the need to defend their programs.

And our schools, students and state will be better for it.

Bob Morrison is director of Arts Ed NJ, a non-profit organization with the mission of providing a unified voice for arts education in New Jersey.