Schools Arts Program Range from Four Star to Nonexistent

by Nicole G. Anderson
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photo flckr The National Dance Institute is one of many groups that has formed partnerships to offer arts education to city public school students..

Eighth graders at MS 223, the Laboratory School of Finance and Technology , in the Bronx, will soon learn about American history through an unusual lens, thanks to a grant the school just received from the Bronx Council of the Arts . Nicholas Thompson, a history teacher and musician, will teach students about how the guitar and its music migrated from the South to cities in the North after the Civil War.

This is just one of many art programs that the school's art coordinator, Rose Greco, and principal Ramon M. Gonzalez, have implemented to increase interest and skills in the arts and keep students engaged in their academic coursework. While MS 223 has taken advantage of resources for the arts, many schools have cut their art programs.

"There are over 1,600 schools in the city, and therefore 1,600 different universes in terms of how the arts are looked at," explained Steven Tennen, executive director of ArtsConnection ,

an organization that fosters creative partnerships with teachers and public schools for teaching dance, music, theater and visual arts.

Has the quality of arts education in public schools improved over the last eight years? This question is difficult to answer, but Tennen's observation underscores the central problem: the wide difference between the quality -- and even the existence -- of arts programs from school to school. The most recent report by the Department of Education's Office of the Arts and Special Projects demonstrated that while there has been progress in some areas, a significant percentage of schools are not in compliance with state mandates for arts education.

Between budgetary restrictions and Mayor Michael Bloomberg's emphasis on accountability, principals are focusing time, money and resources on improving students' test scores in math and English. Some arts program have suffered as a result.

Moving the Money

A shift in funding, advocates say, reflects this. In 1997, then Mayor Rudolph Giuliani created a line item allocation in the school budget called Project Arts that allotted approximately $65 per student. However, in 2007, Bloomberg and Schools Chancellor Joel Klein decided to fold the funding designated for the arts into overall school budgets and no longer require principals to spend that money specifically on arts instruction. Over the last three years, principals have been allowed to use this money at their own discretion, and the result has been a real disparity in the quality of arts instruction offered to students throughout the public school system.

Paul King, executive director of the Office of the Arts and Special Projects, said the department continues to spend money for arts education. "Over this last fiscal year for example, we spent over $326 million on arts instruction and that includes personnel, services and materials. So that $326 million represents about $296 per student, which is almost five times the amount of what the Project Arts allocation was," he said. "It does vary per school, so of course what has happened, and quite honestly happened to a degree even before with Project Arts, is that schools make individual decisions as to how much they are going to spend on the arts."

But the numbers can be misleading, according to Doug Israel, director of research and policy at the Center for Arts Education . "It’s not about the average number that every school is spending, which they say is over $300. It is about the schools that are spending $10 per student or $20 per student," explained Israel. "And for the most part, they are low-income schools that

are struggling, and we think there should be there a real floor to ensure a base line of equity across all schools in the city."

According to a report published by the Center for Arts Education in October 2009, the New York City Public Advocate's Office conducted a survey in 2008 of 100 randomly selected public elementary and 50 randomly selected middle schools, and found 9 percent of middle schools and 7 percent of elementary schools provided no arts education at all. Some schools, then, are spending zero dollars on arts education, On the other hand, some schools, particularly those with an arts focus, may spend far more than $300 a pupil.

Falling Short

New York state and the city mandate arts instruction for all students from pre kindergarten through high school and provide a detailed outline of requirements . Even though schools are under legal obligation to offer arts instruction, many fail to comply with the minimum requirements.

The 2009 Annual Arts Report collected data that indicated some positive changes in the quality of and access to arts education since 2006. These include a general increase across the board in the number of art disciplines offered in elementary, middle and high school as well as an uptick in the percentage of certified arts teachers except in middle school.

However, this data also shows that, in spite of the progress, schools have yet to meet the state mandates. According to the report, 83 percent of the participating elementary schools for 2008-2009 year offer the required four art disciplines, which would mean that 17 percent of schools are not in compliance with the state. In addition, high school and middle school students are required to take art classes from a certified arts teacher, and the report states that only 84 percent of high schools and 77 percent of middle schools have full-time licensed art teachers.

Many students go through school without receiving any instruction in dance or theater. Among the art disciplines, dance and theater are the ones least likely to be taught in elementary, middle and high school. According to the 2009 Arts in School Annual Report, 80 percent of elementary schools, 56 percent of middle schools and 41 percent of high schools in the 2008-09 year offered arts instruction in dance.

A solid arts education usually requires adequate materials and equipment, partnerships with cultural organizations, and certified arts teachers. But over the last three years, school spending on supplies and services for elementary, middle and high schools has decline. For instance, middle schools have suffered a 79 percent decrease in spending on supplies and equipment, and high schools have cut their spending on services such as cultural partnerships by 35 percent.

"How do you teach a visual arts class when you don't have paint and canvasses or a music class without instruments?" commented Israel.

Another Budget Cut

At the beginning of the fiscal year, the city cut schools budgets for FY 2010 by 4.9 percent , and the mayor is seeking additional cuts for the coming year. While these apply to all areas of education, arts advocates worry that the arts education budget will be hit particularly hard by these new cutbacks.

"Budget cuts have definitely had an impact on the schools this year. The usual schools we've always contracted for dance residencies did not have the money this year," said Lucie Santoro, program director for Covenant Ballet Theatre of Brooklyn . "They didn't even have money to send their students to see our educational performance of Ondine: the Sea Sprite on Feb. 24. We decided to drop our price to the performance from $10 to $5. Now we have seven schools signed up for the performance. I've never had a problem getting schools for our residency programs until this year."

The New York City Arts In Education Roundtable conducted a recent survey with its members reflecting on the 2009-2010 year. One question asked, "To what do you attribute this decrease [in cultural partnerships with public schools]?" The number one reason, with a response of 87.1 percent said this decrease was due "cuts in school budgets."

Low on the List

Since Congress passed the No Child Left Behind Act in 2001, standardized testing, particularly in math and English language arts, has been the top priority for schools across the country. Between that and Bloomberg's stress on accountability, principals focus on students' test performance. To add to the pressure, if a Title I (low income) school continues to fail to meet the state requirements for four consecutive years, the principal can lose his/her job. As

school budgets continue to shrink and more time is spent on standardized testing, principals struggle to find the funding for arts instruction.

"What's really a shame is that some of the kids who can benefit the most from the arts and phys ed and those other subjects are the ones who are actually being stuck behind a desk for more hours per day and not being provided any other outlet besides testing, testing, testing and cram, cram, cram," said Israel.

Doing the Best They Can

Working with the largest public school system in the country, the Office of the Arts and Special Projects has taken great steps to ensure that principals have the resources and information they need to provide arts education. The office offers guidance through career development workshops, budget models, and an Arts & Cultural Education Services Guide, in addition to providing benchmarks and curriculum blueprints for each of the four art disciplines.

For the last three years, the Office of the Arts has put a huge effort into collecting important data on the arts by producing the Annual Arts in School Report. Because of its heavy reliance on self-reporting, some experts express skepticism as to the accuracy of all the numbers but still laud the report for the breadth of information.

"I think the Annual Art Report has been very important. I am not sure I agree with all the metrics, but there are metrics. There is a place to start from. There are real numbers for the first time. So the fact they are collecting data and that there is data to be gotten is pretty remarkable," said Tennen.

Nonetheless, schools are still not fulfilling state requirements and art advocates believe more measures need to be taken. State Sen. JosĂ© Serrano , with the help of the Center for Arts Education, has presented legislation that would mandate a statewide audit to make sure schools are in compliance with state arts education requirements. If schools were found to be out compliance, then a "corrective action plan" would be developed with a detailed timetable for implementation.

"There is a lot of really powerful arts instruction happening in the system, but the difficulty is that there is not nearly enough of it, and some cases, kids are going with out it," explains David

Shookhoff, the chair of New York City Arts in Education Roundtable. "And it is possible to go through an entire K-12 school education without really having anything like quality arts instruction. That's the sad story, and the instruction being delivered is not uniformly high quality, but there is progress being made."

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