

# WHITHER THE ARTS IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS?

by Robert Jesselson

Several years ago an editorial in the Charleston, S.C., *News and Courier* demanded that public schools should “spend less time on ‘generals’ like music and art.” And the chairman of the Charleston County School Board was quoted as saying, “We just need to concentrate on basic skills and stay away from the little singing classes and coloring classes and all these funny elective courses.”

Unfortunately some school districts have moved away from teaching the arts in school, resulting in an entire generation of arts-illiterate Americans. In a country which prides itself on some of the best orchestras, museums, dance companies and theaters in the world, who is educating future artists and art lovers? Have our school systems improved as a result of this suppression of art education? The sad fact is that only 11% of American high school students are participating in music of any kind.

Why should the schools bother with the arts? Research during the past few years has revealed that the study of music can actually influence a child’s overall learning potential and his or her educational development. Much research has been done in this area, and these facts must be taken into consideration when discussing the future of our educational systems.

Fact 1) There is a direct relationship between SAT scores and arts study. According to a study in 1990 SAT scores tend to increase with more years of arts study and the more arts work a high school student takes the higher his or her SAT scores.

Fact 2) Students who learn to play a

musical instrument receive higher marks in school than their classmates who don’t. Not only that, but according to a study in Albuquerque, New Mexico, with 5000 students it was discovered that the longer the children had been in instrumental programs the higher they scored.

Fact 3) A study in Tennessee compared gifted and talented students who participated in a fine arts program with other gifted and talented students who did not. The result: those in the fine arts programs scored significantly higher on tests of intelligence and creativity than their peers.

Fact 4) Approximately 90% of the brain’s motor control capabilities are devoted to the hands, mouth and throat. According to experts, the fine dexterity involved with playing a violin can exercise the entire brain and stimulate general intelligence.

Fact 5) In studies at Stanford University psychologists found that “learning to control rhythm and tempo in group music-making helps the student perform other routine activities with greater ease and efficiency.”

Fact 6) According to research at the University of Southern California, “Arts instruction has a significant positive effect on basic language development and reading readiness.”

Fact 7) A study in Colorado found that “members of instrumental music performance ensembles tend to reach higher academic achievement and exhibit lower rates of absenteeism from school than

nonmembers”.

In addition one other fact should be kept in mind as we become increasingly conscious of competition with other countries:

In Japan today every school child between 4<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> grades is required to play a musical instrument. The Japanese have recognized a direct relationship between high technology and economic development with brain lateralism and music. Japanese students score consistently higher on musical aptitude tests than Americans — and this is Western music we’re talking about. In Japan there is a barrier test after 7<sup>th</sup> grade — all students must be able to read music.

But what we are doing in the training of young people is even more important than this research shows. We are passing on our culture — a universal language of music that can cross boundaries and facilitate understanding. As the Charleston sculptor Willard Hirsch said when he addressed the cadets of the Citadel in 1948, “Art is a language, and a powerful one. All of us should know at least a few words in it.”

*Dr. Robert Jesselson is Professor of Cello at the University of South Carolina and serves as Past-President of ASTA WITH NSOA. He wrote this article for his local newspaper several years ago when cuts were threatened. Fortunately the program was not cut. Bob gave us permission to reprint this in the hope that the ideas may help others save their program from cuts. [ed.] †*