

WHY ART?

President Mary Springer

Have you thought about why it is important to have the arts included in the school curriculum? We are often engaged in conversations with each other about the significance of maintaining and sustaining a strong arts program, but what would you say to someone who hasn't had the arts included in their school programs for the past several years? What would you use as your argument to support the need for strong arts education in the schools? What would you do if a specific program was going to be cut?

For the past few years I have considered the question of **why** we need arts education in the school curriculum. This issue varies from state to state and district to district and depends on a variety of circumstances. Those fortunate enough to live in an area where the arts are considered an essential part of a school curriculum, may not understand that isn't the norm everywhere. At a conference, I heard a number of attendees talking about the challenges facing the arts programs in their districts ranging from a decrease in the number of class periods for each class to districts eliminating programs entirely. How do we deal with this problem? What argument should we use to promote the need for arts in the schools?

I recently discovered a book about this subject. *Gifts of the Muse: Reframing the Debate about the Benefits of the Arts* by Kevin F. McCarthy, Elizabeth Heneghan Ondaatje, Laura Zakaras, and Arthur Brooks. They suggest we should consider "the muse" and look at the intrinsic value of the arts. They dispute the validity of previous research that looks at the impact of the arts and higher test scores.

This struck a chord with me. I don't know anyone who sings a song, paints a picture, dances or performs in a play because it will raise their test scores. The power of the arts and what it reflects in terms of our past and present is nearly impossible to measure, but perhaps we need to start talking about it in terms of WHY we need art. One observation that kept coming back to me was the concept of "life-long arts participants." It appears that participation in arts as a community is disappearing. As a culture, we tend to be consumers of art but not active participants. The value of both is obvious to those of us who "do" art in our classrooms and in our personal lives.

So, what can we do? When the issue is so large, it is often impossible to think of what one person can do to advocate for an issue. A couple of years ago, Seattle considered making instrumental music a "buy back" program for each school. This basically meant that each school had a budget and they would have to choose between a variety of resources for their students. For those students involved in instrumental music at the elementary level, some schools in the district might offer the program and others might not. I decided to address this issue by writing every member of the school board and expressing my concern. I didn't stop contacting them until they responded by giving me their opinion about this issue. I was one of many concerned community members who decided to keep this issue alive. After a few months of debate, the school district decided to continue offering the program in each elementary school. I soon realized that it takes baby steps. If several of us take baby steps, we might be surprised at what can happen.

I'd like to end with one of my favorite quotes. It sums up what to consider when we argue for the need to sustain arts programs in school.

"One of the first things that work as the arts develop is a sense of relationship, that nothing stands alone....every aspect of the work affects every other aspect....the arts teach the ability to engage

the imagination as a source of content...they are among the most powerful ways we become human, and that is reason enough to earn them a place in our schools."

Elliot Eisner, January 30, 1997

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So consider the question, WHY ART? And take a few baby steps!

Mary