

**A MODEST PROPOSAL FOR
21ST CENTURY ARTS EDUCATION**
**For Preventing Arts Education In America From Being A Burden To
Schools Or Country, And For Making It Beneficial To Humanity**

(with a nod to Jonathan Swift)

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SUGGESTION #1: CLOSE ALL THE SCHOOLS

The Internet is on the verge of containing virtually all human knowledge (or at least how to find it), as once did the ancient Library at Alexandria two thousand years ago. So if all information can be found online, let's just close down the nation's schools.

Financially, it sure would help. First we could sell the 97,000 public school buildings to mall developers. Next, we could turn the 480,000 school buses into FEMA mobile homes.

Then we could turn our 6 million teachers into soldiers, prison guards, or Wall Street brokers. Overall, we could use the \$68 billion from the federal education budget for more wars (well, a short one, at least), more prisons (necessary if kids will be hanging out all day), and more bailouts (if Wall Street doesn't shut down). States could use their education budgets to wage war on each other. They disagree on enough issues, so why not a little ironic war over the death penalty? (Guess who the soldiers would be.)

So in this economy, why isn't everyone demanding we get rid of the nation's schools?

...OR NOT.

Well, it seems that enough of us realize that schools, and organized education in general, serve a more complex role than just caretaker of children, school buses, and books. Good teachers help kids learn to think, invent, reason, differentiate opinion from fact, and become responsible citizens.

OK, so we keep the schools. For now.

SUGGESTION #2: CANCEL THE ARTS CLASSES

But why keep all those "extra" subjects that range from A-Z? Art, Band, Choir, Dance, through Opera and Photography, to Viral Video, Watercolor, & X-Box Game Design. They're just "fillers" for times when students are too tired to do "real" work like math and reading, or for academically-weak students who have to be in school, by law. So let's just repaint the music room, sell the instruments, store the piano, and set up a study hall.

....and DONE! NOW WHAT?

Yes, many US schools have eliminated entire art programs, even in the face of "No Child Left Behind," which claims that the arts is a "core" subject. Districts trimmed back or

eliminated arts courses, re-purposed or spread thin arts faculty, and dropped graduation requirements that students take at least one arts class in their four years of high school.

The short-term result has meant saving money. But it has also made for bad publicity, caused student protests and parental complaints. Unfortunately, though, parents' voices are no longer heard at school meetings, their letters to the editor are no longer read, and their picketing no longer makes the local news. Their last recourse, to move to a new school district, go into debt to pay private school tuition, or get private lessons for their children.

The result? The local public school has lower enrollment, so federal and state funding is, of course, reduced. More bad publicity keeps new families from moving in, so real estate values drop. The school board cuts more programs, freezes salaries, calls for early retirements. Teachers get laid off. There's no school play this year. No showcase program for parent conferences. No local press coverage. No choir concert to raise money for a senior trip. No joy left in learning. The downward spiral continues on all levels.

We've metaphorically shot ourselves in the foot.

SUGGESTION #3: LOOK AT THE FACTS - EXPAND ARTS CURRICULA

Luckily, wounds heal. So how can we undo bad decisions and heal our nation's schools?

Look at the research.

It shows the value of arts education in combination with academic instruction for building a civilized and powerful society of intelligent, rational, creative, successful citizens. Students enrolled in both arts and academic education systematically perform better on standardized tests and are more likely to stay out of trouble, graduate higher in their class, go to college, accept other cultures, and are better adjusted, according to the Arts Education Partnership 2006 report, *Critical Evidence*.

Look at history.

It illustrates the inestimable role of the arts in recording human cultures, starting with cavedwellers' handpainting on walls to Mayan architecture, Egyptian hieroglyphs and Greek masks to Hawaiian petroglyphs, and Kibuki dances and Hollywood movies to computer graphics and holographic imaging.

Look at the world's greatest teachers.

They have integrated the arts into their own learning and teaching to help make sense of chaos. Philosophers such as Socrates and Plato insisted they could not teach the truth unless they also taught beauty. Contemporary astrophysicists such as Neil deGrasse Tyson and Brian Greene use artistic models to work on intractably complex problems about the cosmos. Medical doctors use the arts to reach brain-damaged patients, mentally-ill or multiple-handicapped people. This has inspired an entire paradigm shift in human understanding about the plasticity of the brain.

Expand Arts Curricula in K-12 Schools

Taught interdisciplinarily, arts and academic subjects complement each other so as to facilitate learning. Students see connections between world events, personal decisions, artistic movements, cartoons, literary masterpieces, medical discoveries, technological inventions, and natural phenomena. Neural pathways in the brains increase in number and strength, allowing them multiple ways of accessing knowledge they've gained (Research on the Value of Arts in Education and Arts in Public Policy. <http://www.artslynx.org/heal/rsrch.htm#Education>). These courses do not detract from their academic success. We are actually making our children smarter when we include arts education in their school curricula.

We must also continually increase the *kinds* of arts education we provide in schools, and at all socio-economic levels, so as to create fair and equal learning environments.

CONCLUSION: USE ARTS EDUCATION TO REGAIN OUR HUMANITY

In the Ancient Library at Alexandria, parchments are said to have contained drawings of now-extinct creatures, inventions ahead of their time, and musical scores of unparalleled beauty along with written records of remarkable human accomplishments. Even older human "publications" are the rediscovered handprints and petroglyphs in Europe, America, and the Pacific. It seems, then, that the earliest written communication of humans was, in essence, art. We can't translate all of it, or play most of the music anymore. But it is evidence that what distinguishes us from other animals, is perhaps not *simply* our use of spoken and written language (as has long been thought).

What makes us uniquely human is our ability to express complex thoughts and feelings *both* in writing *and* in the arts.

If our schools continue to eliminate arts education, children will be denied an essential part of their humanity. When we silence the song, stop the dance, and still the hands of our youth, we fail America's children; we fail our country; we fail humanity. And when an entire generation of failed American children grows up, what kind of America will remain?

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