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Whole-Child Learning Recovery Must Include Arts and Music

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For more than a year, the lights on Broadway went dark, symphonies were silenced, live concerts were canceled. And just as things looked like they may be reopening, another

surge has caused renewed uncertainty and anxiety. Like most arts and music students across the country, my choir singers at Boston Renaissance Charter Public School have missed a considerable stanza of their lives. For them, singing in the “Voices of Renaissance” choir was more than a simple enrichment activity, it was an outlet for self-expression — one that connected them to their classmates and community. It was a stabilizing force in their lives and a place of accountability where choir members were expected to live up to certain standards.

Of course, we were able to connect on Zoom and find creative ways to keep the choir engaged, but the mentoring part really got lost in virtual translation. Realistically, we couldn’t have 125 students raising their voices alongside each other, 10 feet apart, if singing without masks. Besides, if someone told me I had to stand 10 feet away from an alligator, I’d assume it was not safe to be near an alligator. Safety came first, but what comes next could be even more important.

As schools reopen this month, arts and music will play a more important role than ever. After a year torn apart by a pandemic, the arts can be a powerful and effective tool in helping students process the world around them, stay engaged in learning, and express themselves in a way they cannot in other subjects. Unfortunately, many music and arts departments’ budgets were decimated during COVID-19, and many may not be fully funded for the coming school year — especially if schools put a singular focus on getting students back up to speed in math and English. Those are important subjects, of course, but most educators agree that **social-emotional learning** should take center stage at the start of this school year. After a collective trauma, these kids will need the social-emotional benefits that music and art provide.

Further, I always feel a pang of sadness when I hear of a neighboring school district cutting art and music from its curriculum. It’s sad because you may never know how much potential was lost or what hidden talents the students would have discovered had they been exposed to the arts.

If we don’t get students interested in the arts at an early age then we miss a crucial opportunity to build future musicians and art lovers. By the time a student reaches middle school, they have moved on to focusing on STEM subjects. Then no one knows how to play

instruments. We are not bringing up future patrons and no one is supporting the symphony or the theater because they have not been exposed to it or taught that it is important.

If there is anything this year has taught us it is that we almost lost the arts. We cannot let that same mistake happen twice. We must give children every opportunity to experience the arts.

I didn't even realize I could sing until the 12th grade and when I did, it boosted everything in me.

I've seen the transformation of kids who were struggling academically, but suddenly realize they can play the violin and it does wonders for their self-esteem. "If I can play the violin, then I can do algebra." We also take the choir to see the Boston Symphony Orchestra each year (except last year), which is an experience they may not have been exposed to otherwise. At the symphony, a student may be moved by a piece of music and develop a lifelong appreciation. Another Renaissance student took our arts and architecture course and immediately took to it and was drawing up plans like a full-fledged architect. You never know what's within a student or what might awaken their curiosity. The arts provide access to these experiences.

Music is a universal connector. I know everyone in our choir feels like they're all a part of something bigger than themselves. It would be such a disservice to students if they never learned how to appreciate and participate in the arts. How will they know if they like or hate the opera? Maybe one of these students is a budding first chair at Symphony Hall. We'll never know without art and music education.

At the end of the school day, if we're not teaching the whole child, then we're missing out on who the whole child is. We all have something that's a gift or a talent, but it's up to us as educators to inspire and nurture our students. We must advocate for well-funded art and music curriculums everywhere so that one day it will be as fundamental as reading, writing and arithmetic.