

Note: This essay was originally published as Walker, M., & Smagorinsky, P. (2013, January 1). The power of school music programs: Students come for the music and stay for the math. *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*. Available at http://blogs.ajc.com/get-schooled-blog/2013/01/01/the-power-of-school-music-programs-students-come-for-the-music-and-stay-for-the-math/?cxntfid=blogs_get_schooled_blog

Since then, the AJC has cleared out its archives, so it is now only available in the form in which I originally submitted it to Maureen Downey's Get Schooled education blog.

On the Need for Strong Music Programs in School

By Melissa Walker and Peter Smagorinsky

Public schools, in general, have become incriminated in the public mind for having failed society. They must be re-envisioned, restructured, reassessed, and refinanced if they are to serve the public good, according to commentators ranging from folks waiting in line at the post office to governors and national policymakers. Given that schools provide the one common experience that all Americans have, it's easy to blame them for anything that might follow from attendance, no matter how tenuous the connection. If something's wrong with society, it must be a problem that schools and teachers are responsible for.

One approach to reconceiving schools is to strip them down to the bare essentials, especially the STEM imperative that politicians and policymakers believe will make the U.S. economically competitive in the long run. If an academic program doesn't help us contend better with China and India and help us maintain our standard of living, then it's a frill that our tight budgets should not accommodate. Among those superfluties most readily targeted are programs that serve the arts, which might divert kids from academics for an hour or so but produce so few professional musicians and artists that they can no longer be justified. Or so they say.

We beg to differ. We speak from different yet related experiences as educators and citizens. Melissa is a jazz singer who founded and operates Jazz House Kids, with considerable assistance from her husband [Christian McBride](#), a bass player of international acclaim. This foundation is designed to provide New Jersey youth with the resources, support, and direction to play, sing, and appreciate America's original art form: jazz. Peter is a career educator from the field of English (literature, writing, and language in relation to other artistic genres), first as a teacher and since 1990 as a teacher educator. They are linked by Peter's brother Fred, who is presently Chair of the Board of Jazz House Kids and a longtime business executive and musician. What we share is a lifelong love of music and a great concern for the future of American youth.

We do not see music at a sideshow to the real business of education. Rather, we consider formal music programs to provide an activity that accentuates and channels kids' positive interests into team-oriented work that enables them to find a reason to believe in school's potential for improving their lives. In other words, strong music programs serve as the medium through which young people can develop an affiliation with the institution of school. This feeling of belonging and reciprocal responsibility in turn helps to sweep them into other positive currents of activity and direction that school can provide young people. In this sense, music is not a frill. Rather, it's an essential means through which youth, particularly those who have yet to shine or are at-risk,

can find reasons to persist academically across the curriculum and take part in the positive social updraft that both music and school can enable.

Music is often the catalyst that provides the key ingredients for youth to fashion a meaningful future. Participation in a music program can foster and hone the wherewithal, the creativity, the passion, the perseverance, the confidence, the desire, the flexibility, the improvisation, the self-discovery, and the inspiration that comes from meaningful arts experiences. Young people's participation in music involves structure and discipline that promotes essential work habits as straightforward as showing up on time, managing one's time, being prepared, and listening. It also cultivates more complex dispositions and capabilities, such as focusing for prolonged stretches of time, working through challenges, and anticipating and managing change, in relation to both their environments and their own growth. These qualities also contribute to their broader success in school and lay a foundation for positive engagement with society that will last a lifetime. Music programs thus serve a highly utilitarian role in young people's academic lives, every bit as much as do the STEM fields vaunted in current educational policy.

Schools are fundamentally communities. School spirit matters, not just among cheerleaders and athletes but in terms of promoting feelings that the school is a positive place whose activities, programs, and classes are worth participating in. The notion of reciprocal relationships is central to how people feel about participating in and contributing to the social life of the school. Discussions about the role of the arts in school tend to overlook the critical role that they play in helping to build a sense of community and related sense of school affiliation, which in turn produce a host of benefits to kids and schools.

According to [*The Arts and Achievement in At-Risk Youth: Findings from Four Longitudinal Studies National Endowment for the Arts*](#), students with deep arts engagement are four times more likely to participate in extracurricular activities, including school government, yearbook, school newspaper, service clubs, and community volunteering. Prolonged engagement in the arts shows that student participants enjoy greater academic achievement and are better prepared for college. Dedication to artistic activities also contributes to better outcomes in their entry in the initial job market, and better alignment with professional careers.

The commitment of these emerging young artists to their work has important societal benefits, boosting not only their academic achievement but their civic involvement and interest in current affairs, as evidenced by the finding that young people involved in the arts are also more likely to vote. Further, students with high levels of arts engagement have a higher GPA and are more likely to go to college. Those who lack a rich experience in the arts are five times more likely not to graduate from high school. Students heavily engaged in the arts are four times more likely to participate in extracurricular activities than those who are not. That's quite a payoff for such a relatively small investment.

One might argue that the findings from the NEA report does not show a causal effect of arts on kids, but rather identifies traits that pre-exist in students who enroll in such programs. In other words, a critic might say that music does not produce these outcomes, but that kids of privilege tend to have the leisure time and classical orientation to participate in the arts. And no doubt, that is the case for many students who join their school orchestras and play in their wind ensembles.

Yet, quite significantly, students from low socioeconomic families who have a strong history of arts involvement realize the most significant gains in academic achievement. So, for the kids who need it most, music programs provide both the cultural capital and positive trajectory that enables school to get the most out of their abilities and efforts. To borrow a phrase from popular culture, kids come for the music, and stay for the math. And for the music, too. For urban kids, the music that provides the sense of affiliation and belief in school's potential to advance their lives is often jazz.

Melissa's own experience in founding Jazz House Kids illustrates how motivation does not always precede action, but may *follow from* engagement. She did not set out to found an organization that would occupy both her dreams and her waking hours. Rather, over ten years ago she organized a young people's workshop for the WBGO jazz radio station in Newark. This event was such a stunning success that it helped her see the possibility for a more permanent program, one that has grown into a major arts organization that has produced award winning ensembles, high achieving and college bound students from diverse backgrounds, sought after signature programs, and a growing national reputation. Through this work, Melissa has witnessed first-hand the tremendous role that the arts play in building strong and vibrant communities.

Jazz House Kids is an independent foundation, not a school-sponsored program. Yet it has established lasting relationships with schools, providing what the financially-strapped Newark-area schools cannot for their children. Few communities, however, are home to couples such as Walker and McBride, who have the talent, connections, dynamism, and dedication to fill this critical gap in young people's lives. What we have witnessed in Newark is rare, and in the current policy climate, has little prospect of gaining in support and investment when it comes to school budgets because the arts are often positioned as falling outside the academic core.

We are concerned that such short-sighted and ill-informed thinking has grave consequences for the future development of our youth. Compensating for this shortfall of educating the entire child in the schools places the full burden squarely on the shoulders of parents, who must seek out and pay for their children's arts programs out of pocket. Kids from families with limited resources or other priorities might have their dreams deferred or ended before their vision of finding a pathway for meaningful, team-oriented, socially-constructive engagement in a worthwhile activity can begin. In homes without resources, more likely than not, the children go without. God might bless the child who's got his own, but educational policymakers could sure help out.

We believe that arts are not only an essential part of the human experience and our cultural identity, but also an important driver for the long term health of our citizenry and economy as young people use music to undertake new and productive life trajectories. That's no frill. Rather, it's as critical to the core of the educational experience as we can imagine.

Melissa Walker is a professional jazz vocalist and is President & Founder of [Jazz House Kids](#) in Montclair, NJ.

Peter Smagorinsky is Distinguished Research Professor of English Education at The University of Georgia.