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Art's power to teach 21st-century skills

By Lisa Guisbond | December 8, 2008

A RECENT report calling for Massachusetts schools to develop 21st-century skills is cause for both optimism and unease. The promise is that all children, no matter their ZIP code, will benefit from more expansive educational goals, including access to the arts. The concern is that the call to teach and assess more than a narrow set of academic skills will translate into a longer list of high-stakes hoops for teachers and students to jump through.

Education leaders considering how to implement the state's 21st Century Skills Task Force's recommendations can look to an extraordinary local arts program for inspiration. Every summer, Brookline's Creative Arts at Park offers a vivid demonstration of art's power to teach, transform, and develop skills essential for success. Watching my son and his campmates perform "A Midsummer Night's Dream" last July, I thought there could be no better way to learn Shakespeare than to perform it. But this diverse group of young people did much more than memorize one act of a play in five weeks. They mastered a long list of skills, including collaboration, creativity, critical thinking, problem solving, and communication.

According to the 21st Century Skills report, these are the competencies everyone will need to succeed as citizens and workers. These are the skills employers and colleges say are now severely lacking among high school graduates and entering students.

The task force report wisely acknowledges that different tools are needed to assess such skills, including performance assessments like speeches, projects, and exhibitions. Clearly, multiple-choice tests with short written essays are not up to the task. But simply adding more kinds of exams to the current high-stakes system would be a mistake. To promote and assess 21st-century skills, Massachusetts needs to construct a balanced assessment system, as called for in the Education Reform Act.

Some fear that moving beyond our current focus on high-stakes testing and toward multiple measures will mean lowered standards. This argument falsely assumes tests themselves are standards. The fact is that too many schools are now narrowly focused on preparing kids for tests, not educating the whole child.

Nor is it true that students must first memorize some set of basics before they can engage in thinking and interacting with the world. To the contrary, cognitive science and the experiences of nations that score high on international assessments prove that students learn better when they are challenged to think and do, not simply memorize and repeat. Many students are engaged by arts instruction, and when students are engaged, their overall motivation to learn improves.

Massachusetts needs a broader system with more emphasis on classroom-based and performance assessments. We need to make graduation decisions not by a series of separate hurdles but through an integrated approach that taps into our children's diversity of strengths and talents. The cost of such a system is modest and the payoffs large as better-educated students enter adulthood.

The Brookline arts program suggests how much could be gained by giving all students access to the kinds of opportunities usually reserved for rich kids. Wouldn't many children blossom given the chance to steep themselves in Shakespearean culture and language, as they must to put on a coherent performance? Wouldn't they benefit from collaborating and cooperating the way an ensemble cast must do? And wouldn't every child be challenged and grow as a result of all the problem-solving required to put on a play?

Of course, schools should not be turned into theater camps. Quality academic instruction is essential. However, there's been little in my son's school experience to compare with the multidimensional growth I saw as a result of the challenge of playing Nick Bottom. Sadly, the more schools eliminate arts to spend more time boosting test scores, the more access to these experiences is restricted to children whose parents can afford to pay the added costs.

It's time to expand our notion of education and extend the chance for these transformative experiences to all children. I'll be the first to shout "Bravo!" if that is a result of the 21st-century skills report.

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