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Study Finds Instruction in Art Lags in 8th Grade

By [SAM DILLON](#)

Music and art instruction in American eighth-grade classrooms has remained flat over the last decade, according to a new survey by the Department of Education, and one official involved in the survey called student achievement in those subjects “mediocre.”

The [survey](#), released on Monday, was conducted as part of a nationwide test of music and arts achievement administered last year. As the first federal effort since 1997 to examine instruction and measure student achievement in music and the arts, the survey has added new evidence to the debate about whether American schools are cutting back on the subjects they teach to concentrate on improving students’ basic skills.

In the test, formally known as the [National Assessment of Educational Progress](#) in Arts, administrators at 260 public and private schools were asked how much time they devoted to art and music instruction, and 7,900 eighth-grade students were tested on art and music concepts, a small sample compared with other federal assessments. For example, in 2007, the department tested 700,000 students in reading and math, and 29,000 in history.

The small number of students tested, and the 11-year gap since the most recent federal arts test, limited the assessment’s usefulness for reaching conclusions about achievement trends, federal testing officials said.

But one indicator showed a clear decline in student exposure to the arts: 16 percent of students reported having gone with their class to an art museum, gallery or exhibit in the last year. That was down from 22 percent in 1997.

Ellen Weiser, a classical pianist and former member of the Michigan State Board of Education who sits on the National Assessment Governing Board, which oversees the test, said that only about half of eighth graders who listened to a passage of [George Gershwin](#)’s classic “Rhapsody in Blue” were able to identify the solo instrument as a clarinet.

“Unfortunately,” Ms. Weiser said in a statement, the results “do not provide a good sense of the level of student achievement,” although some answers were revealing.

“For example, about half of eighth graders could identify a Renaissance painting,” she said. “A little more than half could identify a half note. While these results are mediocre, not dire, they are disturbing signs for this musician.”

Previous studies have contradicted one another. [Some found](#) that art, music, history and other classes were being taught less frequently as schools focused on reading and math, since the federal [No Child Left Behind](#)

law holds schools accountable for test results in only those subjects. But a [study](#) by the [Government Accountability Office](#) reported in February that the time devoted to arts instruction had remained constant in recent years.

Stuart Kerachsky, acting commissioner of the National Center for Education Statistics at the Education Department, said budget considerations last year had limited the number of students tested as well as the questions posed, rendering it impossible to determine the percentage of students achieving at the advanced, proficient, basic and below basic levels, indicators used to report on reading and other national assessments.

But the results did allow federal officials to conclude that in music and art, white and Asian students scored higher, on average, than African-American and Hispanic students, girls outscored boys, and private schools outperformed public ones.

Patrice Walker Powell, acting chairwoman of the [National Endowment for the Arts](#), said the findings reflected “evidence about issues of concern in arts education.”

“Why are we seeing lackluster levels of student achievement?” Ms. Powell asked.

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