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The Boston Globe

## Arts skills are life skills

By Jonathan Rappaport | June 12, 2007

RECENTLY, THE Massachusetts Department of Education set about the important task of creating a recommended curriculum to increase student readiness for college work. The department should be commended for focusing on this important project, known as MassCore, but it is disturbing that the recommended core curriculum contains no arts component.

There is much to like about MassCore. It adds rigor to many subjects and wisely includes foreign languages in the core curriculum.

But it fails to recognize that areas such as dance, music, theater, and visual arts are far more than just add-ons to the school curriculum. The arts were part of the 1993 Massachusetts Education Reform Act's Common Core of Learning and it is well documented that they develop cognitive ability, analytical reasoning, and higher-order thinking skills, creativity, focus, and presentation skills.

High school students involved in the arts consistently score higher on the SAT than their non-arts peers.

The gap widens with each additional year of arts courses taken in high school. All this strongly suggests that learning the arts plays a key role in learning the skills needed for a successful college or work experience.

Business leaders also recognize that young people entering the workforce not only need literacy and numeracy skills, but creativity -- the ability to "think outside the box." This skill is exactly what arts education develops, and it is one of our nation's leading advantages over the rigid education systems of some of our emerging competitors like China and India.

In a recent survey, 81 percent of American corporate leaders said they consider creativity an essential skill for the 21st-century workforce, yet only 21 percent reported excellence in this area among recent college graduates seeking employment with their companies. The survey found equally disturbing skill deficits in other key areas including teamwork and collaboration, critical thinking and problem solving, and oral communication.

The survey data come from "Are They Really Ready to Work?" a study by The Conference Board, Corporate Voices for Working Families, Partnership for 21st Century Skills, and the Society for Human Resource Management. The study was one of the topics at a recent forum on the creative economy hosted by MetLife, which explored issues such as how artistic processes and experiences can be used to surface the creativity that drives innovation in business.

The forum also looked at how the integration of arts-based learning into school curricula, after-school activities, corporate training, and lifelong learning can foster the development of a creative, innovative, communicative, and collaborative workforce. These are the very skills that corporate leaders say our workers currently lack.

Clearly corporate America gets it when it comes to arts education, but why don't education policy makers in Massachusetts?

The Commonwealth has the weakest arts education requirements of all the New England states, several of which have specified high school graduation requirements in the arts. In many Massachusetts school districts, including Springfield and Boston, there are students who graduate from high school without ever having a single arts course taught by a licensed arts educator.

Nationally, 40 states have at least one arts requirement for high school graduation. Massachusetts, the birthplace of music education, among other educational innovations, doesn't require even a single arts credit for graduation.

If far poorer states like Maine and Mississippi can find the time and money to mandate K-12 arts education, so can wealthy Massachusetts. All we lack is the will to do it. Actions speak louder than words, and the Education Department should stop giving lip service to the importance of arts education and make it a graduation requirement for all the Commonwealth's students.

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