

Some push for arts in core curriculum

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Arts advocates are pushing the state Department of Education to make arts education a bigger part of recommended high school graduation requirements, which list music, art, and related subjects as electives.

The state, for the first time, has been drawing up a list of courses it would like all high schools to require, at a minimum, though the final decision remains with the school systems. Most high schools generally do not require art and music for graduation, but art groups say they want schools to be forced to require more arts. Otherwise, the arts will be cut even further in financially strapped schools, the advocates say. State officials say they're not limiting what schools can offer, but are proposing basic requirements.

"It seems almost like a step back to not include the arts as part of a core curriculum," said Anita Walker, executive director of the Massachusetts Cultural Council. "If the arts aren't there, I think there is no doubt that we will see them falling out of schools across Massachusetts."

The recommendations, which the state Board of Education plans to vote on this fall, include four credits each of English and math, three credits each of history and a lab-based science, two credits in the same foreign language, and six credits in a chosen elective. Electives may include visual and performing arts, career and technical education, technology, or additional courses in other academic subjects. Arts advocates would like to see students required to take at least one credit of art.

Heidi Guarino, a Department of Education spokeswoman, said the recommendations, called MassCore, would serve as a framework for high schools to develop graduation requirements. MassCore was developed with the state Board of Higher Education and is meant to offer a "recipe for college success," Guarino said.

"The expectation is that schools will include the arts whenever and however possible," she said. The only state-mandated graduation requirements are passing the English and math MCAS exam. An MCAS science exam will be required starting with the class of 2010, and a state history exam will be a requirement by 2012.

Amanda Karhuse, director of government and public relations for the National Association of Secondary School Principals, said most high schools treat the arts as an elective. As schools have been urged to perform better on math and reading tests, many have put less emphasis on the arts, she said.

"Some argue that there's a narrowing of the curriculum because there is much more focused on testing and reading and math," Karhuse said. "Some of those courses, like the arts, are falling by the wayside."

Health Careers Academy in Boston, largely for budgetary reasons, cut arts offerings five years ago, said Albert Holland, the school's executive director. Students already follow proposed recommendations the state plans to approve and take four additional credits in a health science, he said.

"If schools were funded correctly, we would be able to offer a full range of arts courses that are so necessary for children to be well-rounded," Holland said. "With high stakes testing, schools were forced to make a choice. Unfortunately, the arts go in every school in our situation." The academy's students get some arts instruction through supplemental visits to a local dance studio and fitness center, he said.

Barbara Wallace Grossman, chairwoman of the Department of Drama and Dance at Tufts University, lobbied for more arts in the curriculum Tuesday.

"There's a well-known saying in arts advocacy circles: 'Give a child a flute or a paintbrush and that child will be less likely to pick up a gun or a syringe,'" said Grossman, also vice chairwoman of the Massachusetts Cultural Council.

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