

GLOBE EDITORIAL

The logo for The Boston Globe, featuring the words "The Boston Globe" in a black, serif font.

The sound of music (and arts)

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MIKE HUCKABEE seems like just another nice-guy Republican pitching his conservative credentials in the presidential race. But when the former Arkansas governor starts talking about the importance of the arts and education, he's practically Maria von Trapp harmonizing about the power of music and metaphor.

Huckabee calls the arts and music "weapons of mass instruction." If education touches only one side of the brain, he recently told the Globe editorial board, then it's just "a data download." Rather, schools should use art and music to develop both the left and right sides of students' brains, and to translate and transmit culture.

For Huckabee the issue is personal and political. In 1966, his parents scraped together \$99 to buy his first guitar. Today, he is in a band, Capitol Offense, that performed at the recent Iowa straw poll, where Huckabee came in a campaign-boosting second behind former Massachusetts governor Mitt Romney.

Huckabee's policy point is that schools can and should provide a rigorous arts education even amid the demands of the No Child Left Behind Act. The federal law has sent many school districts scrambling to help students increase their math and English skills in order to pass state tests. But the law also defines the arts as a core subject in which states should have challenging standards. And an NCLB grant program provides funds that school districts can use to develop arts programming or assessment tools.

But since there's no high-stakes testing in the arts, many school districts shrink arts instruction. This creates a negative domino effect. For example, students who don't learn to read music in grade school aren't prepared to play in the high school band.

Huckabee's home state of Arkansas offers evidence of what can be done. A 2005 state law requires elementary schools to offer 40 minutes per week of music and art. The state's high schools are required to offer fine arts courses, including visual arts, music, and dance. To graduate from high school, students are required to take half a year of one of these.

There have also been challenges, such as finding enough art teachers who are certified. Superintendents have complained that there was no dedicated state funding to implement these programs.

The next president could address these issues, calling for a bigger federal investment in state efforts and asking states to do more basic assessments, such as measuring hours of arts instruction, numbers and types of arts classes offered, and numbers of qualified teachers.

Regardless of how the Republican presidential contest plays out, Huckabee is right to bring attention to art and music. The right side of the brain is a terrible thing to waste. ■

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