



## Testing Fails the Arts

by Richard Kessler  
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As New York City public schools begin to receive new funds from the state as part of [the agreement](#) in the long-standing Campaign for Fiscal Equity lawsuit, schools will undoubtedly face enormous pressure to improve scores on standardized tests. This is understandable, but should not come at the expense of social studies, foreign languages, physical education - and the arts. All of these make for a well-rounded education but are not measured on standardized tests.

While the "Contracts for Excellence" recently agreed to with the state [forgo the funding for additional standardized tests](#) that the Bloomberg administration had sought, the bulk of the funds -- \$442 million -- are not governed by these agreements. And the \$248 million that they represent is a very small part of the city's \$19 billion budget for public schools.

The Department of Education had to come to terms with the governor and so earmark funds to reduce class size and improve training for teachers and principals. Similarly, one would hope that decision-makers will also begin to rethink the emphasis placed on standardized testing in reading and math.

While the drive toward accountability and the focus on reporting is well intentioned, the over-reliance on standardizing testing has been met with growing public criticism. In fact, the recently released [Department of Education Progress Reports](#) and their assigned letter grades to schools, have left many parents and school communities scratching their heads, while others are just plain angry. (See [related story](#))

### An 'Incomplete' for the Report Cards

What strikes many observers is how narrow the reporting scheme for the Progress Reports developed by the Department of Education is. The major portion of a school's score, 85 percent, came down to how well students did on two standardized tests, the state math and English language arts multiple-choice exams. While these are indeed very important measures, relying too heavily on them and penalizing those schools and principals that receive failing grades, ultimately cheats our students and our city. What is more, many people fail to understand the relationship between the Progress Reports and Quality Reviews issued for each school, the latter of which consider a much wider array of data.

While both the Department of Education and the federal government identify the arts as vital to a good education, the grades -- and the standardized testing approach -- fail to acknowledge the central role subjects beyond reading and math play in a child's education. Arts education may very well be the "incomplete" in these report cards.

After the recent release of the Progress Reports, a vice principal at I.S. 318 [told the New York Sun](#) that his school would not give in to the pressure to up its "grade" from a B to an A. "We ... care about the test, but not enough to sacrifice ... art, music, chess, robotics - just to

make sure they get a better or equal score than they got the year before," he said. More test prep, according to the principal, would leave students bored, not stronger learners.

What this administrator understands is that test prep, often called "drill and kill," has its limits. Parents know it too. They want a well-rounded education for their children, and that may be why some send their children to private schools or flee the city to enroll their children in suburban schools.

## The Importance of the Arts

[Multiple studies](#) show that learning in the arts enhances learning in other subject areas and contributes to a student's overall development. In addition to the skills taught in the individual arts disciplines -- visual art, dance, music and drama -- the arts provide students with unique opportunities to work collaboratively, to develop creative and critical thinking skills, to solve problems and develop innovative solutions -- all 21st century skills that employers in New York City and around the world want.

In fact, [a national poll](#) released in early November by Harris Interactive, an independent research company, showed that 83 percent of people earning \$150,000 or more had a music education.

In New York City, arguably the arts capital of the world, the arts in our public schools have only recently begun to recover from the devastating budget cuts of the 1970s. The scarce data that exists indicates that more New York City public school students have access to arts education now than they did 25 years ago. In 1991, only one-third of the schools indicated having at least one arts specialist, but in 2006, according to a Department of Education study, two thirds of the schools reported having at least one full or part-time arts specialist. Evidence also indicates that [school partnerships](#) with cultural organizations have expanded, although children living outside of Manhattan are half as likely to go to a school with such a partnership as those in Manhattan.

There is still, however, a long way to go to restoring arts education for all of New York's 1.1 million public school students. According to the Department of Education's [parent survey](#) for the 2006-2007 school year, 41 percent of parents surveyed say their children receive zero arts education. A 2006 department study found that hundreds of schools did not have a single certified arts teacher. Other studies have indicated that, even in schools where arts are offered, only a fraction of the students receive the instruction.

Recognizing the value of arts, New York State in 1996 developed [a minimum set of state requirements](#) that, if adhered to, would be an improvement on the current instruction in the arts. The city has also developed a "[Blueprint for Teaching and Learning in the Arts](#)" that emphasizes arts instruction. However, it is no secret that principals and teachers are feeling the squeeze to sacrifice the elements of an education that do not directly relate to what appears on standardized tests.

The Department of Education has also launched ArtsCount, with a focus on holding principals accountable for meeting the minimum state requirements in arts education. It is not at all clear how ArtsCount, which is separate from the well-publicized school report cards, will ensure that every child receives the minimum arts education required by New York State. Moreover, many people remain skeptical of the department. The school system has, after all, eliminated Project Arts, the only real guarantee, a financial guarantee, that no matter what

else happened, there would be funding for arts education for every single child in every public school.

In this age of high stakes testing and accountability, a focus on the arts is more important than ever. Fortunately, New York State has set minimum state requirements that all public schools across the state must meet for the arts. However, this minimum is little more than a starting point, as all it requires in the critical middle and high school years is a total of two years of arts. As a matter of equity and of access, the city should redouble efforts to ensure that all New York City public schools at the very minimum meet these requirements and provide a high quality well-rounded education to every child in the city.

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