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New report bears bad news about arts education

Yesterday the DOE released its long-awaited "Annual Arts and Schools Report" (pdf), an optional survey completed by 1,079 principals about their arts offerings in the 2006-2007 school year. The DOE says the report is important because it ushers in a new era of detailed reporting on arts education data, but the real story is that few elementary or middle school students get the bare minimum arts education required by the state. The New York Times, unlike the Sun, got the story right: Only 4 percent of elementary schools have the resources to provide the range and depth of arts instruction the state requires, and the vast majority of middle schoolers — 71 percent — receive less than the state-mandated two half-unit arts courses in the 7th and 8th grades.

The city is "not providing a well-education" to its children, said Richard Kessler, the director of **the Center for Arts Education**, which is ramping up its role as an advocate for arts education. He told me the city's anemic arts education has a lot to do with the inexperience of many new principals, who have never been taught the importance of the arts and whose own educational experiences likely lacked quality arts programming as well. Giving the arts and other marginalized subjects the role they ought to occupy will require "major in-service and pre-service" training for principals, Kessler said, but the DOE's plans, outlined in the report, represent only "tinkering around the margins" of existing programs.

Kessler was a member of the DOE's arts education task force, convened last summer when ArtsCount was announced in part to address criticism that the elimination of special Project Arts funds would lead principals to reallocate funds from the arts to other subjects. Ultimately, it sounds like the task force played a minimal role in creating the report or recommending its outcomes. The DOE also appears to have backed away from a major goal it outlined last summer: to use the arts data to hold principals and schools accountable for meeting state requirements in the arts and to make the school-by-school arts data transparent and accessible so parents can use the level of arts programming as a factor in choosing a school. The level of deficiency in elementary and middle school arts offerings indicates that principals can't justifiably be held accountable for a nearly systemic failure.

The report's "next steps" section includes news that the DOE will make lesson plans and standards-aligned curriculums available to teachers and that efforts are underway to make principals "better consumers" of existing arts resources. But with deep budget cuts looming and math and reading test scores continuing to make up 85 percent of schools' grades, what resources and incentives do principals have to spend their limited funds and time on the arts?