

Equitable Extracurriculars: Budget cuts cut experiences

Anyone who has children or works in school settings knows that overall, today's school children have considerably less options when it comes to extracurriculars than older people did when were were growing up. This begs the question: Do the after-school programs that are offered state-wide make up for scaled back arts and physical/health education, and other extras no longer offered in public schools?

To put things in perspective, I am 29 years old. When I attended Western Hills Middle School and Cranston High School West (both Cranston public schools), it seemed like there were so many choices for itinerant courses and after-school programs — including sports and foreign languages, plural — that it was tough to choose which to participate in. We had Mock Trial, Model United Nations, school newspapers, yearbooks, Science Olympiad, debate, golf, cheer, dance, Spanish, French, Italian, home Ec, volleyball, lacrosse, etc. It was a wonderful problem to have!

Having worked in elementary and middle schools throughout RI for the past year and a half, I've seen first-hand how relatively fewer opportunities like these that there are for children now. When addressing the "big question" that I mentioned above, I started by speaking with Shannon Fogel, a New York transplant and Master of Fine Arts (RISD) who has been teaching art in Pawtucket public schools and after-school programs in RI for more than five years. Fogel has a relationship with Providence iCityArts! for Youth, the nonprofit Americorps program that provides free, high-quality arts education to children at its Broad Street studio. She also teaches art after school and in the summer at the Providence Boys and Girls Club.

She explained that, even in the past few years, things have been changing. iCityArts!, for example, has removed itself from several PVD locations that it used to partner with. Still, she and other art professionals forge on, working where they can make a positive impact on children who may otherwise not have access to arts education. Sure, students still typically take art class in elementary, middle and /or high school, but these courses tend to be offered limitedly — that is, children don't get to fully immerse themselves in projects, performances and productions, and sometimes go whole semesters or years without exposure to the arts.

Fortunately, several independent businesses and groups have stepped up to fill the void. In Cranston, for instance, the registered nonprofit Artists' Exchange (Rolfe Square) offers summer camp as well as seven-week arts, theater, music and ceramic classes for kids that commence at 4pm on weekdays. According to operations manager Jenny Sivo, the Artists' Exchange also offers after-school arts programs to schools (on-site at the school) that are interested. Discounted pricing is available for people who attend their Fall Out of Summer Arts Festival, which is happening on September 22.

In PVD, the East Side Arts Center (ESAC) has been a destination for children to enhance their art education for 27 years. The vice president, Don Simon, who has taught classes at the ESAC for children ages 5 through 15, stated that the business was established in direct response to budget cuts for visual arts in public schools. He believes that, “the pressures [for teachers] to ‘get it all in’ — and achieve test scores that are so important to the school’s standing” harms kids. “They suffer because there is little creative outlet and, just as important, not enough physical exercise during their school day. They need to express both. You can hear it in the volume in the lunchroom.”

According to Simon and the ESAC website, all of the teachers at the ESAC are extremely experienced in the professional art and teaching worlds. Therefore, they seamlessly fuse the two. “We see what we present as opportunities to problem-solve and encourage the kids to consider the possibilities by first understanding what’s presented and then figuring out how to present a solution. The beauty of ‘art’ is there are many answers. A school like ours allows for and encourages a variety of responses.”

As an English language arts teacher myself (I teach seventh grade at Jenks in Pawtucket — Go jaguars!), I understand the importance of teaching students to think creatively to solve problems. I agree with Simon that it’s also critical to show students that there is more than one way to answer many things, so long as you adequately support your reasoning.

Unfortunately, many RI families simply can’t afford these high-quality, tried-and-true after-school programs. What’s worse is that many of our public elementary schools don’t offer *any* free or inexpensive after-school programs. One parent, Annmarie, has three children, including two elementary school-aged children attending different Warwick public schools. She says that although her daughter’s school has many free after-school activities that she can register for, her son’s school, “is all about the money.” She recently attended the school’s open house and was disheartened to see that it featured several vendors hawking overpriced toys — but no sign-ups for extracurriculars or after-school programs.

On the bright side, there are plenty of well-qualified and impassioned professionals in our state who provide afternoon and weekend classes for kids (those whose families can afford it). Besides visual arts, there are other outlets the families with enough funding can enroll their children in, such as Made By Me Cooking School in Warren, which offers classes where kids learn how to prepare meals.

There are also ample ways for the youth to work up a sweat when they’re not in school. What sets programs like Young Ninjas at Laid-Back Fitness (Warwick) apart is that they can even appeal to children who aren’t into team sports. The individual-centered classes have competitions, and birthday parties are modeled after the “American Ninja Warrior” competition TV show. Ninja warriors can also enjoy open gym twice a week, which, according to Nicole Jardin, the Young Ninja coordinator, is perfect “for kids who don’t like structure” to run around and play.

Still, on a local level, there is clearly a glaring disconnect between the art and athletic endeavors that some families can afford and what others are monetarily privy to. Sadly, it's a problem that doesn't seem to be going away soon. It's fantastic that we have a plethora of phenomenal for-profit programs at our disposal, but what if families can't pay for it? Will some children grow up without reaching their highest potential? And what can we do about it?