

STUDENT DEVELOPMENT, COVID INTERRUPTIONS AND THE PERFORMING ARTS
Thoughts on Recovery for Consideration by Administrators

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The educational value of the performing arts in schools, particularly through participation in ensembles and performance opportunities, has been researched, proven, and documented across numerous and varied studies for many years. There has perhaps never been quite so vital a moment for their existence, promotion, and support than during the seismic changes and challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. Throughout the tremendous interruptions faced by many school systems and the upheaval of families and livelihoods, arts education has remained a guiding light and a bulwark of joy, excellence, normalcy, and camaraderie for many students. While the extent of lost class time and the opportunity to actively participate with one's peers in performing arts varies from system to system, the reality of this impact for students is universal. One of the greatest fears students express is a sense of hopelessness and lack of motivation to move forward and past a feeling of "what might be next". The performing arts are a primary vehicle for many students to move past the fears of isolation and loss and move toward a brighter tomorrow.

In the best of times the arts provide an outlet for emotions and the opportunity to explore feelings that may be difficult to express in words or actions. In stressful times the performing arts allow humans to escape the trauma, at least for a time, and enjoy creating beauty with others. Art is valuable for art's sake and should never be taken for granted. Now, more than ever, it makes everything better.

These truths are especially important to take note of because school systems are diligently attempting to find ways to recover lost instructional time across disciplines. The mistake would be to minimize our performing arts programs in favor of allocating additional time for other subjects, and it would be a grave mistake, both for those programs, and for students overall. We appreciate the difficult challenge facing administrators in creating master schedules that meet the holistic needs of all students. Continued arts instruction, even when facing the challenge of recovering lost instruction time for other subjects, is an investment in students access to courses that inspire motivation, joy, hope, pride, purpose and power...all ingredients necessary to academic achievement and overall well-being. Students who are engaged creatively and collaboratively are far more likely to make the effort necessary to attempt to regain that very lost ground that is lamented as "learning loss".

In many places the performing arts have suffered more setbacks than most subject areas simply due to the nature of the art form. While teachers worked harder than ever to try to offer opportunities online, the reality is that it is extremely difficult to successfully start a beginning student on an instrument when you cannot physically demonstrate or correct their attempts or bring a new performer onto the stage when there is not, in fact, a stage available. This means that the success rate for young students is understandably far less than when in-person class is available. Unfortunately, when students are not successful, they often do not continue. Additionally, in normal times the performing arts are the very best activities available in school for valuable and safe social/emotional development. Students learn to be themselves, to be expressive and to be willing to do what is good for others and the success of the ensemble. When they cannot meet as a group, these important lessons and the willingness to work hard to achieve them are weakened. The sad truth of both the lack of success of young students not in class and the loss of social/emotional opportunities for older students has led to a drop in enrollment in many programs. It is imperative that we look carefully at the legitimate causes of this loss and create concrete ways to rebuild. The biggest mistake we could make would be to reduce staffing because of a short-term enrollment loss. Teachers need support and the time in the schedule to do everything possible to rebuild robust enrollment numbers and performance standards during this ongoing health crisis.

This rebuilding effort requires time in the schedule and the support of excellent administrators, school boards and parents. It will take a few years to regain losses in this crucial component of our curriculums. If, however, we make poor choices at this juncture, make cuts in staffing or reduce proper scheduling and financial support, the performing arts may never recover in some places. While all students could benefit from participation in a quality fine arts program, some students simply must have these opportunities in order to thrive. For those students, and for the rest that could benefit alongside them, the survival of the performing arts is vital. We should not make the situation worse by making decisions that cause the negative effects of Covid-19 to linger longer than necessary. Staffing, scheduling, and funding fine arts programs with an eye on the future, rather than the present, will go a long way to getting us back to normal as quickly as possible. And in that normal, there are performing arts, there is joy, and these programs contribute to the advancement of students across disciplines.