



all about arts

“The new Arts Advocacy Council paints a positive picture to demonstrate how the arts enhance learning.”

Every day students go to school to learn math, science, and social studies - subjects that will prepare them for the future. Ask them who Rembrandt is or how many symphonies Beethoven wrote or what Ronald Reagan did before he became president and they might not have a clue.

Although research shows that an education in the arts is important to the overall education of a child, in schools all across the country, subjects like art, chorus, band, and theater are either scaled back or not offered at all.

And while the West Allegheny School District offers all of these, something is being done to increase the time allotted to teach the arts.

Through the Arts Advocacy Council, chaired by veteran art teacher Debbie Turici, educators, parents, and students have come together to expand arts education in the classroom.

The draft of the council’s mission statement says, “The Arts Advocacy Council actively supports and promotes the arts – visual, music, theatre, and dance – through education, leadership, and service.”

Currently, students in the West Allegheny School District receive 35 minutes of arts education every six days, while there are other school districts who offer up to 100 minutes of arts education a week. Many of the teachers in West Allegheny share classes because the district lacks a full-time staff. Debbie says that because there aren’t enough teachers or enough time in the school day, many students are missing out on field trips to the museum, ballet, and theater.

These are just a couple of the problems that members of the council hope to change.

... students in music appreciation scored 63 points higher on verbal and 44 points higher on math than students with no arts appreciation.

“College-bound Seniors National Report, Profile of SAT Program Test Takers,” Princeton, NJ. The College Entrance Examination Board, 2001

“I’d like to see more teachers added so that the kids get more time for arts during the day,” says parent Susan Tarasenkov. “I’d like to see the many benefits of arts education recognized and used to strengthen all other aspects of education which will better prepare our children for life.”

As District Arts Coordinator, Tom Snyder does it all. Besides coordinating the overall arts program district-wide, developing and implementing curriculum, and serving as the arts liaison with administration, other faculty, parents, and communities, he also teaches sixth grade lessons and band and serves as producer of the high school’s fall play and spring musical theatre productions.

Tom says he’d like to see an increase in arts electives offered at the high school, including Advanced Drawing & Painting, Music & Art Appreciation, Jazz Studies, and the Performing Arts. He also plans to continue to update the written curriculum, “to reflect full

implementation of national and state standards as well as proven best practices in arts education.”

According to Debbie, the council is actively seeking accreditation from West Allegheny School District to use its name and become the West Allegheny Arts Advocacy Council. But in order for that to happen, they first need to solidify their vision, mission, and goals, as well as their constitution and bylaws, in order to present them to the board.

The council meets each month at Donaldson Elementary School to discuss budget analysis, action plans, their mission, and goals and to offer support and encouragement for anyone interested in advocating for the arts. The council remains visible

2007-08 ENROLLMENT DATA

PROGRAM	STUDENTS ENROLLED
CHORUS 5-12	812
BAND 4-12	523
ART ELECTIVES 4-12	213
FORENSICS	20-30
FALL PLAY	Cast of 12-20 + others involved in set painting, stage crew, etc.
SPRING MUSICAL	Cast of 50-60 + another 50-90 involved in kids' cast, stage crew, theatre art, pit orchestra and ushers

in the community through local fairs, PTA meetings, and open houses. A web site is in the works.

One of the many goals of the council is to show how an education in the arts will lead students to be successful in their other courses as well as in their overall school performance. They don't have to look far to find plenty of studies that show the positive effects of an arts education.

According to a report from the College Entrance Examination Board, "students in music appreciation scored 63 points higher on verbal and 44 points higher on math than students with no arts appreciation" while research in the publication *Champions of Change: The Impact of the Arts on Learning* (1999), found that "students who participate in the arts outperform their peers on virtually every measure" and that an experience in the arts, "helps level the educational playing field for disadvantaged students."

While there are regulations and federal laws that say students must receive a certain amount of arts education, many schools lack the resources needed to offer such courses.

West Allegheny Superintendent Dr. John S. DiSanti says that there really aren't any requirements in place in regards to art education.

"We're expected to offer music," he says, "but there are some schools where regular teachers teach the arts because of cutbacks."

"We have requirements by the state and the nation that say we have to provide arts and humanities," says Eve Monks, another parent on the council. "Where are they getting it if we don't offer enough art, band, chorus, or anything? They're not getting it. It's slipping by them."

Schools are pressured to focus on testing students in subjects like reading and math in what's been called "teaching to test."

Opponents of high-stakes testing claim that it abandons real

OPPOSITE PAGE: Community people lined up across the driveway to the entrance of the high school gymnasium to get a seat to the annual Celebration of the Arts event. **THIS PAGE:** The Arts Advocacy Council booth at the Findlay Fair brought out many young artists to try their hand at painting, including this youngster.

learning in favor of memorizing, while arts advocates say that it takes away time that could be spent in music and art classes.

"The greatest challenge occurring now," says Dr. DiSanti, "is that there is a tremendous

amount of time spent on academics and testing. There is only so much time in the day that can be devoted to the arts. Many are cutting back because of the rules with testing."

Students may come away knowing how to test, but by missing out on the arts, they're missing out on a whole set of





ABOVE: The high school flute quintet performed during the Celebrate the Arts event last spring; volunteers of the Arts Advocacy Council share information with attendees at Celebrate the Arts, an annual event to showcase the artistic and musical talents of West Allegheny's students and staff. **BELOW:** The combined school choruses presented a wide selection of music at the event.

skills that can help them succeed in college and in the workforce.

According to research conducted by the Americans for the Arts, "business executives see that abilities such as creative writing and public speaking will be needed if the workforce is to be innovative."

They also found that, "arts education develops the precise set of skills students need in order to thrive in a global economy that is driven by knowledge and ideas. Increasing numbers of high-paying jobs in the future will be centered on creativity, higher-order thinking, and communication skills."

The Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts says that when you look at the schools that have the highest test scores on standardized tests, "generally you will find that the arts are a part of their curriculum."

An arts education teaches students to think outside the box and encourages them to have different opinions. Whether a student wants to work in computers or business or become the next president, being able to express themselves with confidence and having the ability to think creatively will enhance their personal and professional lives.

"My children enjoy music and art classes because it gives them a different perspective on their school day," says Nancy Volk, whose children attend West Allegheny. "They feel free to think and problem solve on their own without fear of being incorrect."

The Arts Advocacy Council has only been meeting since January 2008, but they've already experienced a lot of success in their efforts. This past March, the West Allegheny School District approved a resolution that recognizes the arts as an important part of the school curriculum. The council recently received a \$1,000 grant from the Pennsylvania State Education Association and a \$500 grant from the West Allegheny Education Association. They are also partnering with other arts advocacy organizations and cultural institutions.

Both the school district and the community have been very supportive of the council's efforts and if their present success is any indication, the West Allegheny School District is going to have a very bright future in arts education. And it's that future that is going to allow hundreds of students to excel beyond their wildest dreams.

"The arts allow people to appreciate things in life," says Dr. DiSanti, "There would be a big hole in their lives without it."

