

Borsuk: Looking for higher achievement in Milwaukee schools? Go where the arts are offered

By Alan J. Borsuk, Special to the Journal Sentinel

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Ladies and gentlemen, I direct your attention to the Milwaukee Ronald Reagan High School Chamber Choir, performing a clever parody of the “Carol of the Bells.” With nearly professional quality, more than three dozen choir members turn the popular Christmas piece into a salute to their favorite MPS cafeteria lunch, chicken patties.

It’s great. (I mean the music. I don’t know about the patties.)

Involvement in music or drama or similar activities, either during the school day or after school, is a big plus in the high school careers of many students. The Reagan choir is a good example of how such groups can be creative, fun and demanding. Participation expands students’ talents, increases self-esteem and requires rigorous commitment and close teamwork. It gets many students more connected to school as a whole.

But while the picture for such enrichment is good at Reagan and some other Milwaukee high schools, the picture overall for MPS is not good. And the arts scene at high schools strongly parallels the academic scene at those schools.

In short, the highest performing schools academically are also the ones with the most arts programs. And there are six high schools in MPS, all with low academic records, that have almost nothing to offer in performing arts.

My interest in this was piqued by an email I got last fall during the Shorewood High School controversy over whether to perform “To Kill a Mockingbird.” An MPS teacher wrote, “When I hear of this and all the ‘inequalities’ concerning MPS vs. suburban districts, the one thing that comes to my mind is, ‘what schools in MPS even have plays anymore?’ ”

Good question. So I asked and MPS provided lists of which schools offer any of seven types of programs: theater, concert band, orchestra, choir, jazz band, marching band and drumline.

The haves and have-nots

Five MPS schools have at least five of the seven. They are Reagan, Rufus King, Riverside, High School of the Arts and Golda Meir. All five have comparatively good academic records. It should be noted that all five have “select criteria,” which means, in short, you have to show some ability, like writing an essay, before being admitted.

According to the MPS list, six schools offer none of the seven activities. They are Vincent, Obama, Washington, South Division, Bradley Tech and James Madison. Marshall, Pulaski and Audubon offer one. North Division offers two.

These schools generally have low to very low academic records and their admission policy is to take every kid, often ones coming in well behind grade level. The schools have art and music classes. But such classes offer limited opportunities compared to, say, a school orchestra or play.

Arts making a comeback

I asked MPS administrators about the arts scene and why some schools have a lot and others don't.

“The really positive point is that we've been on the increase” when it comes to art and music education throughout MPS, said Deborah Jolitz, manager of fine arts.

Through roughly the decade of the 2000s, arts and music shrank, victims of tight budgets and a nationwide emphasis on reading and math (and testing) under the federal No Child Left Behind law.

In more recent years, MPS has restored some (not all) of this. Jolitz said every school now gets funding for at least one day a week of a teacher for each of three “special” areas: art, music and physical education. She said school leaders are not allowed to go below one day a week in each area, but they can increase it, depending on their priorities, needs and total budget.

Whether to have programs such as choirs or bands is decided at the school level. Thus, the wide variation in offerings.

Results in ACT scores

I said that at the high school level, there is a striking overlap in how much schools are offering in arts programs and how students are doing on the ACT Aspire test given to ninth- and 10th-graders as part of Wisconsin's accountability system. Rich arts and music programs line up with better academic results.

“Amen,” Jolitz said.

Jolitz and April Heding, supervisor of the MPS partnership for the arts and the humanities, said there are serious teacher shortages in some areas, especially music, which leads to MPS partnering with nonprofit organizations to provide teachers. For example, the Wisconsin Conservatory of Music provides music teachers in many schools.

MPS is also providing grants to a wide range of arts groups to provide programs outside of the school day to children in the city, including many not in MPS schools.

Superintendent Keith Posley has said he wants to emphasize reading, writing and math skills for students. Will that mean tightening up time for art and music?

“No, not at all,” said Jeremiah Holiday, interim chief academic officer for MPS. Brain development is enhanced by the arts and arts programs are important to meeting students’ need, he said, adding, “Students have to have that reason to connect” to school.

In her 2016 book, “Grit: The Power of Passions and Perseverance,” Angela Duckworth, a University of Pennsylvania psychologist wrote, “Do extracurriculars pay off in any measurable way? There are countless research studies showing that kids who are more involved in extracurriculars fare better on just about every conceivable metric — they earn better grades, have higher self-esteem, are less likely to get into trouble and so forth.” That includes long-term success in getting jobs that pay well.

Arts seem to get too little attention as an area of inequity and as a field that offers potential payoffs in educational success. Applause for Reagan High and its art programs. A lot more kids should have the chance to take part in such high-quality work.

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