

Learning more than soccer: The case for widening (not narrowing) the curriculum

KRT FORUM

By Dorothy Rich
(KRT)

In an effort to raise test scores and build student academic skills in many schools across the nation, what are considered frills or waste of time on non-essential subjects are being cut. This includes physical education, art, music, even recess. And what a bad idea this is. Let me explain.

It's vital that all children, especially those who start with lower test scores, have a variety of ways in which to succeed, to be able to say "I can do that." This is the sense of achievement that carries over from the extra-curriculars to the curriculars.

When we narrow the curriculum to academics only and drill, drill, drill, there are fewer ways for students to experience feelings of success. This translates into lower graduation rates and test scores that might blip up briefly but have trouble being sustained.

It takes success to build success and the arts and music and sports are essential for stronger academics. I saw this firsthand on a little soccer field recently. A bunch of 4- and 5-year-old boys (along with two girls) were supposedly playing soccer. It didn't look much like soccer yet. What they were learning was actually more important for their coming school success.

The coach, from the local recreation center, was teaching the basics of academic success, even if it was called "soccer practice."

He called out to the little group: "Welcome soccer players. Today, we will learn how to pass to our teammates. Today you will run with your head up. Today you will learn to wait your turn. Today you will keep on trying even when you miss a kick or fall down. Come on, soccer players, today you will listen to me and follow directions carefully. Let's go."

This coach was teaching the attitudes and habits that it takes to build successful students ... as well as soccer players. Art and music build comparable success capacities for academics and offer the extra bonus of production, a final product, not just a score, at the end.

In "regular" school, my grandson who identifies his favorite subject as physical education, says that the PE teachers now comes only once a week. The same is true for art and for music. The school system he attends, like hundreds across the nation, have cut down on so-called non-essentials in order to provide more time for basic skills that show up on tests.

What a topsy-turvy, wrongheaded way of thinking. The arts and music and physical education course cutters are forgetting what these "extras" teach when they are taught right. In fact, these aren't extras at all. They are intrinsic to achievement.

Perhaps nowhere else in the schooling do children get to understand that achievement takes time. A vase starts with a lump of clay, a story with single word, a dance with a first step, a violin with a squeak. There is a level of personal satisfaction in the arts (and on the playing field with sports) that stimulate children to learn and to want to keep on learning.

Texts are not the only ways to teach reading and writing and math, and may instead be among the least effective tools for many students. Good teachers know how to teach reading using sports and play and all the traditional extras. So, let's stop calling them "extras" or even "supplemental." That demeans their power and their funding and the time we allocate to them. They are and always have been essentials.

Everyone has to have a sense of achievement in some way in order to go on to achieve more. This doesn't always happen in the traditional academic classroom. For many children it hardly ever happens. This is tragic, and it is no way to build academic success. The extras provide the extra chance that many, if not most, children need.

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