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Sonoma County public schools greatly lack access to arts education, despite state mandate

Nearly four out of five of the county's public schools do not provide the comprehensive arts curriculum required by California law.

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Cleo Fresco, 8, and dozens of her Oak Grove Elementary School classmates achieved their own version of musical bliss, many smiling from ear to ear amid the organized chaos of more than 40 third-graders participating in weekly music class.

They clanked wooden claves and shook egg-shaped shakers as they sang along on a recent morning with music teacher Andrew Deveny, who has taught at numerous Sonoma County schools for 15 years.

This music lesson introduced a composition known as a “round,” when at least three voices sing the same melody but start at different times. The goal is for the voices to blend harmoniously.

Each of the Sebastopol public charter school’s 450 students receives a comprehensive arts education. They’re taught classes in visual arts such as pottery and drawing, as well as performance courses including dance, chorus and band.



However, Oak Grove represents an exception in Sonoma County when it comes to arts education. Nearly 4 out of 5 of the county's public schools do not provide the comprehensive arts curriculum required by California law, according to an analysis of state education department data by Big Idea Arts and Education Consulting, a local group that specializes in implementing arts education reforms. The analysis focused on access to arts courses and the socioeconomic factors that contributed to a wide range of enrollment levels among the schools.

Every public school across the state needs to provide courses in dance, music, theater and visual arts. In addition, middle and high schools are supposed to offer applied arts courses such as automotive engineering, industrial arts or general agriculture, for example.

The rules are not enforced, though. According to the state Department of Education, 39% of California students were enrolled in arts classes in the 2017-18 school year. While Sonoma County reported arts enrollment slightly higher at 42%, it trailed neighboring Marin (55%), Napa (53%) and Lake (46%) counties.

A handful of organizations here are trying to reestablish a meaningful arts curriculum at every school in the county.

Creative Sonoma, a division of the Sonoma County Economic Development Board, and the Sonoma County Office of Education last month released a five-year plan to increase the access and scope of arts education in public schools, especially at schools with vulnerable students. Called the Sonoma County Arts Education Framework, it was the culmination of years of research and analysis.

"It's a matter of getting around the things we're putting as obstacles in our way to doing that," said Creative Sonoma director Kristen Madsen. "Whether that is funding choices, facilities, the time of day."

Furthermore, research shows arts education helps address many of the pressing issues schools already face, Madsen said. Aptitude test scores, student suspension rates and daily attendance all improve when arts classes are taught, she said.

"The kids who need it the most are likely getting it the least, and that's a gut punch," Madsen said of the inconsistency among the county's 40 school districts on art class offerings.

Little encouragement for arts education

When it comes to the decay of the arts curriculum, education officials said it has been a casualty almost 50 years in the making, despite the value of the arts in students' social and emotional development, especially for disadvantaged or special needs students.

Comparing arts education in region's secondary schools

Across the five-county region, Sonoma County trails all but Mendocino County in the number of students in middle and high schools enrolled in arts courses.

County arts enrollment; % arts teachers per 1,000 students; median household incomes

Marin County: 55%; 7; \$113,908

Napa County: 53%; 6; \$79,637

Lake County: 46%; 9; \$40,446

Sonoma County: 42%; 9; \$80,409

Mendocino County: 36%; 12; \$46,528

Source: California Department of Education; Data USA

Robin Hampton, a coordinator with the California Alliance for Arts Education advocacy group, said state approval in 1978 of Proposition 13, which restricted increases of property taxes that account for one-third of a public school district's budget, was one of the first pivotal policy changes that caused financial resources to shift away from arts instruction in schools.



Andrew Deveny teaches music to third-graders at Bellevue Elementary School in Santa Rosa on Monday, Dec. 9, 2019. BETH SCHLANKER/ The Press Democrat)

"It was a gradual thing where arts (classes) just kind of started disappearing," said Hampton, who leads Arts Now, one of California Alliance's programs. "I don't think there's a person in the state that said, 'Let's get rid of arts.' But the focus was test scores, and arts don't get tested."

The accountability systems put in place forced local school districts to devote most of their daily instructional time on subjects that determined a school's performance ratings, said Karen McGahey, a retired Sonoma County educator and longtime arts advocate who ended her career as the director of leadership development for the county office of education. Improving public school education has been a priority for previous U.S. presidents, who spent billions of dollars on landmark programs like No Child Left Behind under George W. Bush and the Common Core State Standards under Barack Obama.

"When these teachers were under this tremendous pressure to improve math and English, guess where they're going to spend their time?" said McGahey, former principal at Mary Collins School in Petaluma.

There was also a lack of support at the county level. When McGahey took her job at the county office of education more than six years ago, the agency was doing little in terms of encouraging arts education, she said, leaving districts on their own if they wanted to create or improve their programs.



Meg Mizutani, teaching artist and Taiko drummer, left, teaches volunteers how to drum during a demonstration at the Sonoma County Arts Education Framework breakfast event at the Luther Burbank Center for the Arts in Santa Rosa on Thursday, Dec. 12, 2019. (Christopher Chung/ The Press Democrat)

"When I went to the county office, there was nobody doing anything about the arts," McGahey said. "If we were going to help schools and districts strive for comprehensive arts education programs, we needed to give them something to work with."

There appears to be widespread support for making arts education improvements in Sonoma County. A 2017 Creative Sonoma survey found that 87% of local teachers and administrators think teaching the creative arts is "important," and 100% of parents in the Windsor Unified School District said arts should be a core subject for students.

Wealth influencing arts enrollment

Over time, access to arts courses became a matter of race and place. The analysis by Big Idea Arts and Education Consulting found that Sonoma County students in lower socioeconomic areas have enrollment rates in arts classes 35% lower than students in wealthier areas when comparing districts of similar size.

"Those are the schools that suffer the most in that the administrators are pedaling as fast as they can to meet basic needs," Hampton said. "Then it's like, 'You want me to add arts education?' But by adding it, some really amazing things happen."



Artist and teacher Bill Donahue teaches figure drawing to fourth-graders in Carinne Paddockfs' class at Oak Grove Elementary in Sebastopol. (BETH SCHLANKER/ The Press Democrat)

Twelve county schools did not offer a single arts class. Four of them served special needs students, and seven were continuation or alternative schools for at-risk youth. Only 16% of Roseland Public Schools students, who are 93% Hispanic and with nearly 89% qualifying for free or reduced-price lunches, are enrolled in arts courses. In the West Sonoma County Union High School district – where 23% of students are Hispanic and 32% qualify for free or reduced-price lunch – arts enrollment was 52% in the 2016-17 school year.

Indeed, a 2012 study by the National Endowment for the Arts found that high school students who took arts courses were three times more likely to eventually earn a bachelor's degree than those who didn't.

Planning a long-term path to improvement

Last month's release of the county's arts education five-year plan was the culmination of a more than four-year undertaking, and required a candid assessment to establish a baseline for how local public schools were managing a once-vital piece of public education. The analysis by Big Idea education consulting firm was instrumental in the formation of the plan.

The proposed path to a state-compliant arts program in this county comes with four main goals: training educators; developing art-minded school leadership; strengthening communication in the community; and sustainable state funding.

Creative Sonoma said it will be awarding five schools each a \$5,000 grant this year to help develop an arts education plan, crafted through consultations with curriculum specialists and the California Alliance for Arts Education.

Success of those efforts will hinge on community buy-in from parents, teachers, administrators and district leaders, said Debbie Yarrow, Creative Sonoma's project coordinator for arts education.

The bulk of the five-year plan is focused on professional development, indicating how much its architects think the local mindset needs to shift when it comes to the value of arts courses in overall education.

"This is not another thing to add onto the plate (for teachers), but a vehicle to get at the concerns schools are trying to (address) for their students," Yarrow said. "This is a journey, and all the schools and districts are starting at various places in this journey."



Maria Carrillo High School student Zoya Ahmed receives a hug from Margo Perin, of California Poets in the Schools, after reading her poem, "A Concerto of Spice", during the Sonoma County Arts Education Framework breakfast event at the Luther Burbank Center for the Arts in Santa Rosa on Thursday, Dec. 12, 2019. (Christopher Chung/ The Press Democrat)

Allison Frenzel, a former Windsor High School teacher who helped secure a \$1.7 million arts education grant from the state in 2018 for the Windsor school district, said the biggest change has to happen during the annual budgeting process.

The county's arts education plan arrived as schools were reviewing their local control and accountability plans to determine priorities for the next three years. Now is the time for communities to advocate for the arts, she said.

Frenzel, now a program consultant for the state education department, said, "When there is a leader in the district that believes in the power of arts and understands the importance of arts education in alignment with all other disciplines, the money appears."

The county's two largest districts, Santa Rosa and Petaluma, have seen the number of students enrolled in the arts decline by roughly 6% and 7%, respectively, since the state began compiling arts education data for middle and high schools in 2013.

Largest school districts fall behind

Petaluma City Schools Assistant Superintendent Cliff DeGraw said arts enrollment "ebbs and flows" in his district, where 36% of students were taking an arts class in the 2017-18 school year. He wasn't sure what caused the downward trend, but suggested changes to graduation requirements and the advent of so-called "double block" scheduling for struggling students have made it harder to fit arts classes into the schedule.

Most county schools require students take one year of the arts to graduate, but education officials said that can be replaced with career and technical education courses. They have become a popular option for students seeking vocational training at school.

"There's just so much competition for elective courses," DeGraw said, alluding to different ways a student could supplant taking arts courses. "In some cases, you could have a kid graduate with no art at all."

In Santa Rosa schools, even though fewer students might be taking arts classes, secondary schools — middle and high schools — have been able to mostly maintain their arts programs over the past two decades, said Elizabeth Evans, the district's director of teaching and learning.



Kristen Madsen, director of Creative Sonoma, speaks during the Sonoma County Arts Education Framework breakfast event at the Luther Burbank Center for the Arts in Santa Rosa on Thursday, Dec. 12, 2019. (Christopher Chung/ The Press Democrat)

Almost half (47%) of Santa Rosa's secondary school students are enrolled in arts courses, but it was the elementary schools that were hit the hardest by efforts like No Child Left Behind and that resulted in a declining number of arts classes, Evans said.

Given the sheer number of elementary schools in California, which make up over half of the state's 10,521 public schools, information about arts access for students in kindergarten through sixth grade is mostly anecdotal. Although, a 2017 Arts Education Alliance survey of six Sonoma County districts found that half of elementary students have no access to creative arts education.

Santa Rosa is hoping that will change after receiving a \$1.3 million grant from the state in 2018 to enhance its arts program at the elementary level, Evans said. About 80% of that money was used to buy 1,554 new musical instruments, and the rest went toward teacher training and a "music blitz" effort to attract more students.

Petaluma is also focusing attention on bolstering arts education options for its youngest students. A land tax approved by voters in 2000 enabled the district to start an art docent program that brings volunteers to classrooms for one-day workshops. But DeGraw said the district hopes to further expand its primary school arts curriculum by partnering with Petaluma's emerging campaign to add arts courses.

Increasing access to arts classes is a goal of the school board, and the Petaluma school district intends to align with its elected officials by including that priority in the district's upcoming control and accountability plan, DeGraw said.

Parents raising money for the arts

Even though less than half of county students are enrolled in an arts course, 98% of Sonoma County schools offer at least one art class. However, some of the schools depend greatly on money and support from parents.

For example, the robust creative arts curriculum at Oak Grove Elementary is paid for partly by a parent group, the Oak Grove Education Partners, that raises about \$80,000 annually. The average annual budget for the program is \$160,000, Principal Paige Gardner said. "We know how lucky we are," she said.



Third-graders James Rodriguez, 9, and Archer Fecteau, 8, left, play the claves during a music class taught by Andrew Deveny at Bellevue Elementary School in Santa Rosa on Monday, Dec. 9, 2019. (BETH SCHLANKER/ The Press Democrat)

On a recent Friday at the school, first-grade teacher Stephanie Stevenson's class bounced from music class with Deveny to a visual art class with Ginny Spincer, who taught them foreground and background techniques by drawing fish.

"Sometimes it can impact my normal curriculum because I have less time in the classroom," Stevenson said. "But it's worth it because these things teach them so much more than just drawing. They're learning so many skills."

Bellevue Elementary in southwest Santa Rosa uses a combination of district, grant and parent-raised funds to provide a visual or performing arts class for each grade level, either during the school day or afterschool.

➤ *I don't think there's a person in the state that said, 'Let's get rid of arts.' But the focus was test scores, and arts don't get tested.*

– Robin Hampton, coordinator with the California Alliance for Arts Education

Bellevue Principal Nina Craig said kindergarten through second-graders are offered an optional Latin hip-hop dance course for eight weeks. Third graders are provided a music class. Fourth and fifth graders take a mandatory ukulele class. And the district pays for a fifth and sixth-grade violin

class after school.

Craig said increasing arts access for students has been an ongoing project for four years, and developed into a priority for a predominantly Hispanic community where 84% of its students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch.

"It's been a perfect shared value," she said. "It's slowly evolving."

Windsor schools recognized for advancing arts

Local education officials spotlighted Windsor, which is home to an arts education program the state designated as a "model site" in 2013. Officials credited a bullish coalition led by arts advocate Joella Olsen, school board trustee Bill Adams and Frenzel, who created the nonprofit Pulse Arts to connect arts professionals with students statewide.

The \$1.7 million state grant the district received in 2018 will benefit about 2,500 Windsor students. About \$400,000 of the money was spent on art supplies and musical instruments, and a similar sum went toward hiring and training teachers in arts integration techniques. The next phase of the grant is focused on creating instruction time for the arts.



Santa Rosa High School student Sofie Flores, right, talks about how dance has influenced her life during the Sonoma County Arts Education Framework breakfast event at the Luther Burbank Center for the Arts in Santa Rosa on Thursday, Dec. 12, 2019. (Christopher Chung/ The Press Democrat)

Frenzel said developing the arts program in Windsor required over two years of volunteer work devoted to arts advocacy campaigns, presentations and attracting support. While admitting it was frustrating at times, Frenzel said the hard work led to an expanding arts program that has

become sustainable without her as she works in Sacramento now to provide that kind of arts education in school districts statewide.

Until state regulations change how arts courses are taught at schools, Hampton, the Arts Now coordinator, said it's that level of advocacy – referring to Frenzel's work for Windsor schools – and strong commitment of community members that will bring the county's five-year arts education plan to life.

“We know real work starts at the grassroots level,” Hampton said, noting the Creative Sonoma and county education office collaboration. That's what this county group in Sonoma is doing.”

Ultimately, it's students like Fresco at Oak Grove Elementary who benefit.

Just really love singing and learning new instruments,” Fresco said. can learn new songs and write them in my journal and practice every day.”

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