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Davisite fights for arts programs in the schools

By Jeff Hudson | staff writer | Davis Enterprise | February 02, 2010 09:00



Fred Gladdis/Enterprise photo

As policy director with the California Alliance for Arts Education, Davis resident Joe Landon faces a daunting task: helping communities keep the arts in their public schools in the face of huge budget cuts. Joe Landon - a longtime Davis resident and statewide advocate for arts education in the public schools - is a worried man these days.

School districts up and down the state have absorbed huge budget cuts from Sacramento. As a result, during the next six weeks, school boards in hundreds of communities will consider resolutions to lay off some of their teachers. And Landon worries that a disproportionate percentage of those layoff notices may go to people who teach music, theater and other arts-related subjects.

'We're watching closely, knowing the vulnerability of arts education,' said Landon, who is policy director with the California Alliance for Arts Education - a tiny organization with a staff of four. 'We know how lean it is for school districts right now. School board members are being forced to make really tough decisions.'

The situation in Davis is a mixed bag. In 2008, Davis voters approved a parcel tax - Measure W, charging \$120 per home per year - that supports local school music programs, among other things, through June 2012. But there is a full-time art teaching position among the 80.45 local full-time positions that would receive layoff notices under a draft resolution the school board will consider Thursday night.

Voters in Pasadena will decide the fate of a similar \$120-per-year parcel tax in May, which would support the arts and libraries in their local schools. But a parcel tax needs a two-thirds majority of votes to pass, and that kind of support for a tax increase is never an easy campaign, even in the best of times.

Pasadena and Davis, of course, are communities where many residents are college graduates, with higher-than-average incomes.

'We know that in more affluent areas, there is recognition of what the arts mean in children's lives,' Landon said. 'People are more willing to go that extra distance and put these measures on the ballot and fight for their passage.'

'The challenge that we face is that as the percentage of low-income students goes up (in a community), the ability of students to access the arts tends to go down. There's a real inequity,' depending on where a student lives.

And in many California cities, the proposed cuts to school arts programs are draconian. In the Los Angeles Unified School District - the state's largest, with nearly 700,000 students - 'the proposal on the table includes a 50 percent cut in arts education, followed by the elimination of the entire elementary school arts program the next year,' Landon said.

The Los Angeles Unified district faces a \$470 million shortfall this year, largely due to state budget reductions.

Another challenge facing arts educators is that while California students are rigorously tested annually in subjects like English and math, there's no corresponding portion of the STAR tests that addresses the arts.

'And when schools are told that their test scores need to rise, and you are not on that list (of subjects tested), it inherently puts you at risk,' Landon said.

'But in reality, the arts offer a way of accessing the learning process that's unique and critical. The arts actually help students prepare for a career, in ways that other subjects can't,' he added.

So Landon goes up and down the state - visiting places like Sonoma (in the wine country), Sonora (in the gold country) and Salinas (aka 'the nation's salad bowl') - to help school districts and business leaders develop local plans to sustain arts programs during these bleak budgetary times.

'And I only mentioned cities that begin with the letter 'S,' ' Landon added. 'I've also been to five cities in Orange County, and five in San Diego County, and Bakersfield, and Compton ...'

Landon comes from an arts background.

'Some years ago, I was a playwright-in-residence at the American Conservatory Theater in San Francisco,' he said. 'More recently, I wrote 'Fanny at Chez Panisse,' a musical based on a book for children by Alice Waters. ... It was done at the Julia Morgan Theater in Berkeley.'

Landon and his family came to Davis from Los Angeles about 15 years ago. 'I had been writing for TV and film. My wife entered a Ph.D. program. And we had kids in school,' he said.

The task Landon now faces is to help as many communities as possible keep the arts in their public school curriculum for the next generation of kids.

'Our argument is that the arts are at the core of a good education, just like English and math,' he said. ' We need to be mindful that some people perceive the arts as an 'extra treat.' But our research indicates that in many cases, the arts are the glue that holds a student's education together.'

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