



Books or Band? by Karen Virag Making hard choices in Alberta's underfunded schools

Bart Heine, a Grade 8 and 9 English, drama and art teacher at F.P. Walshe school in Fort Macleod, is feeling the pinch. His Grade 9 drama class has an unworkable 35 students, while the senior high drama program has been cut altogether. Heine's Grade 9 art class has 34 students. The art budget, cut in half two years ago, is now \$500. With about 100 students registered in the art program, that works out to \$5 per student. Parents subsidize the art program by \$10 per child, for a whopping total of 15 bucks a year for art supplies—about enough to buy a 24-pack of Laurentian colouring pencils. Heine recounts the story of a student below average in all pursuits, both academic and physical, who one day handed him an extraordinary drawing. "I had no idea she could draw like that," he says. "Here was a kid who had the ability to be the best at something, and we cut programs."

Programs in the fine arts are especially hard hit. New trombones or canvases or stage lights are a low priority when money is in short supply for books or supplies. Why

are the schools so strapped? Because school boards have been required to take last year's mandated 14 per cent teacher salary increase out of existing funding.

In 2002, when over 21,000 of Alberta's 32,000 teachers went on strike, the government ordered the teachers back to work. That order was overturned in the courts. An arbitration panel recommended a 14 per cent salary increase for teachers over two years, considerably higher than the 6 per cent the government had earmarked for teacher salaries. But this award has been a pyrrhic victory for the teaching profession. Teachers who had provisions in their collective agreements relating to class size or hours of instruction had these clauses stripped by government legislation. And instead of increasing funding to school boards, the government told the boards to take the mandated 14 per cent increase from existing funding.

The result is principals backed into corners. Says one about the funding choices she faces this year: "It's books or band."

School boards are responsible for distributing funds to individual schools in their district. Principals are responsible for paying the school's bills, the largest of which is for teacher salaries (anywhere from 65 to 75 per cent of budget). The rest of the money is used for books, technology and supplies, which may or may not include paint brushes.

School boards in Alberta used to have taxing authority—if a particular facility or service was needed, taxes could be raised locally to pay for it. Now, the province is the sole source of money for school boards, which act like middlemen. In this way, the government can deflect criticism from itself and point the finger at boards for layoffs and spending decisions. As one rural principal, who wishes to remain anonymous, told me, "Alberta Learning has been quite adept at shifting the blame by keeping control of the money but devolving the responsibility for decision making. If a band program dies, it looks like the decision was made at the local level."

JOHN SHARPE

MANY ARTISTS IN THIS SOCIETY STRUGGLE to eke out a living and often are forced to create their art outside of their "real" jobs. A certain mistrust of creativity festers in this culture, and there has been a historical tendency on the part of essential institutions like the provincial government to hold the arts in some degree of mistrust—creativity being the opposite of passivity and therefore anathema to order. Further, prejudice against pleasure still holds sway in general public perceptions of learning and schooling, despite the myriad studies that say that learning is best accomplished through stimulating—dare I say enjoyable—activity. Now I wouldn't want to suggest that our educational system is run by a bunch of purse-lipped, Dickensian Mr. Gradgrinds, but with an emphasis on standardized tests, buzzwords like accountability and efficiency, cutbacks and crowded classrooms, fine arts can be seen as unessential frills.

School districts used to own and maintain their own art equipment, but as resources have dwindled, the onus has fallen on parents to buy these things, particularly musical

instruments—difficult for many. The result is fundraising campaigns, which give an advantage to more affluent areas and reinforce the notion of the arts as a mere hobby. “Fundraising tends to undervalue the whole attitude towards the arts,” a principal says. “Alberta Learning used to support teacher in-service to a high degree, but that has waned. All costs are now picked up by schools—another blow for the arts... It hurts to have to be the one making these decisions, having to cut programs that you know are valuable. We are forced to compromise all the time.”



What the province spends on students

Each year, the province spends about \$6,500 per student, which includes a per-pupil grant of about \$4,500 for kindergarten to Grade 9, and about \$5,100 for Grade 10. In Grades 11 and 12, the amount depends on the number of credit enrolment units (CEUs) students take. Funding for each CEU is approximately \$127. Generally, funding for Grade 10 to 12 students is higher than for kindergarten to Grade 9 students. (Note that these dollar figures do not include construction costs, costs of maintaining schools and costs of computers and other equipment for new or restored schools, funding for which is provided by the Department of Infrastructure.)

In some jurisdictions, each school receives its funding as a portion of the total provincial funds received by the board. In these jurisdictions, provincial funds may be seen as flowing through the board directly to schools. In other jurisdictions, the board works with principals to decide on the exact allocation of funding. For example, a school with a higher than average number of special needs students might get more funding; such jurisdiction-wide initiatives as Reading Recovery or ESL programs would be funded by drawing off a portion from each school.

In Alberta fine arts are core subjects until Grade 7 (when most students are about age 12), after which they become optional. In junior high and above, although many options are available, the system streams students, and for the university-bound, taking fine arts is usually not feasible.

Elementary children must complete 950 hours of instruction in a year, of which 10 per cent are dedicated to the fine arts, specifically art and music. As one long-time elementary teacher told me, the actual time earmarked for fine arts studies at the elementary level has not changed over the years. “What has changed, however,” she says, “is that very few schools, especially in rural areas, can offer music with a music specialist.” She offers an example of her small-town experience when she was obligated to teach music, even though she has a drama background. The regular classroom teacher, who might have no training in the area, would teach music. When this happens at the junior and senior high level, where fine arts courses are optional, the effect is far more serious: a course taught by a non-specialist is less interesting, fewer students enroll and it starts to die a slow death.

Peter McWhir, a retired drama teacher with over 40 years’ experience and current president of the Fine Arts Council of the Alberta Teachers’ Association, is familiar with the strain put on the arts under these circumstances. “When principals have tough choices to make,” he states, “there is no bloody way they’re going to hire a drama specialist.” In this environment, perhaps it is no small wonder that some students become disaffected with the arts, viewing them as of dubious value to their future pursuits.

According to long-time educator John Taylor Gatto, the modern Western education system was founded on a militaristic model and seeks to “produce mediocre intellects, to hamstring the inner life, to deny students appreciable leadership skills and to ensure docile and incomplete citizens—all in order to render the populace ‘manageable.’” He goes on to cite H.L. Mencken, who in 1924 wrote that “the aim of public education... is simply to reduce as many individuals as possible to the same safe level, to breed and train a standardized citizenry, to put down dissent and originality.”

Gatto refers to the six functions of schooling as delineated in a seminal 1918 book *Principles of Secondary Education*: the adjustive or adaptive function, which establishes habits in children, thereby militating against the formation of critical faculties; the integrative function, which strives to make children as alike as possible; the diagnostic function, in which the school determines each person’s role (think standardized tests); the differentiating function, which trains children to fulfill a prescribed role (think streaming children into certain pursuits); the selective function, in which certain low achievers are labelled as inferior (think the Fraser Institute school rankings); and, finally, the propædeutic function, in which a small coterie of students is taught how to manage and control (think the government’s increased funding to private schools) a deliberately

dumbed-down population (think of “severely normal” Canadians personified by the toqued and mackinawed Bob and Doug Mackenzie). These “archaic” schooling functions are not so different from what happens today.

Governments still view the imagination with some mistrust. Although an Alberta Learning spokesman told me that the government “really values art, music and drama as important components to a child’s education,” there are no plans to make any fine arts courses compulsory in junior or senior high. In fact, as retired drama teacher and past president of the ATA’s Fine Arts Council Gaye McVean told me, the province does not even have an arts education policy.

WHY STUDY THE ARTS AT ALL? Well, other than for pleasure, appreciation of beauty and the exploration of an essential human quality, there are pedagogical reasons.

Art is a break from the normal routine of school life with its rules, timetabled subjects, exams, tests and quizzes. Initially art appears to inspire chaos, but art rooms are feasts for the five senses and both hemispheres of the brain, riots of colours, mountains of shapes and symphonies of the sound of discovery. Teachers speak passionately about how giving students creative outlets enhances their overall performance.

Research on the arts, music in particular, tells us that the arts are good for the brain. Norman Weinberger, a neurobiologist and professor at the University of California, Irvine, contends that humans are born with a biological ability and attraction to music, and that the practice and appreciation of music are not simply cultural dictates. According to Weinberger, a number of findings support this belief: first, music is pan-cultural, and parents of all cultures communicate with infants in musical language, be it lullabies or musical baby talk; second, children are born with neural mechanisms devoted exclusively to music and exhibit musical behaviour long before they learn to sing “Inky Dinky Spider” in kindergarten; and finally, the human brain contains specialized building blocks that process fundamental elements in music—the right hemisphere of the brain handles melody, the left, language.

Studies attest to music’s ability to increase spatial/temporal reasoning, which is the ability to see patterns in space and time, an essential ability in math and physics. Brain scans have shown that while a musician is playing, almost the entire cerebral cortex is active, involving auditory, visual, cognitive, affective and motor skills. Our brains are the original multitaskers. Happily, these positive effects of music on the brain occur through listening as well, especially to classical music.

According to Weinberger, “Because we know that musical competency is part of our biological heritage—part of human nature—we should not continue to treat it as a frill... I regard music and the arts as essential, not optional, components of education. We should not have to justify music in our curriculum.”

What do musicians themselves say? Legendary Alberta bandleader Tommy Banks told me, “I don’t understand how curriculum development people can continue to fail to recognize music in particular as an enormously valuable core subject that affects performance in other subjects. Socrates was the first to say it, and it’s still true today. Music should be part of core curriculum.”

Though the focus of much brain research has been on music, researchers have also found a link between drama and comprehension and recall of stories, language development and reading. Similar results have been found with the visual arts. One study is investigating the cognitive effect of dance.

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STILL, THE TAIL MUSTN’T WAG THE DOG. Improving spatial/temporal abilities should never be the raison d’être of fine arts programs; such programs are valuable in and of themselves. In fact, Peter McWhir believes that the arts are the most important subject in the school, because they require “soul work.” In the arts, kids tell their stories, are encouraged to test their limits and learn to work together. “Do we want that in society?” he asks. “Yes, we do.”

McWhir relates the story of a troubled student who seemed to be on a one-way trip to the young offenders centre. This student enrolled in McWhir’s drama class and won a starring role in a play as Jesus Christ. The student went on to establish his own theatre company in Calgary.

An acknowledgement that education must address the whole person and recognize the emotions as essential to intelligence has led many teachers to incorporate the arts into other subjects. Teachers Judy Sills and Stacy Fysh from Edmonton’s Victoria School for the Performing Arts glow when they describe how this process works. “We help kids see the connections,” they declare. According to school principal Ingrid Neitsch, the positive effect of the arts at Victoria is mirrored in the students’ academic achievements.

James M. Stanford, retired chairman of Petro-Canada and past chair of the Calgary Philharmonic Orchestra, is also a proponent of teaching arts in school. “Art is not leisure to be turned on and off as we have free time or the inclination, but is a response to a deep need to find meaning and the expression of the essential element that identifies us as humans,” he says. “It is deeply personal and consistently communal, but it is constant and necessary to our lives.”

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