

No Child Left Behind and Fine Arts Classes

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Since the Bush administration enacted the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) in 2002, lawmakers and school administrators have questioned what changes, if any, the Obama administration will make. This article discusses the effects of NCLB on nontested subjects, specifically music and arts in the general curriculum. Major effects on scheduling and funding policies have forced educators to reconsider how advocacy for the arts should be approached.

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The inauguration of a new president raises questions about what kind of policy changes will take place. One law that is currently under consideration for either repeal or reform is the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). There can be no doubt that this law has affected the way the public education system across the nation is organized and managed.

Some of the short-term effects of this law have troubling implications for subjects that are not evaluated for the purposes of determining adequate yearly progress (AYP), a measure that serves as the basis for all federal funding. Although the law states that many subjects (designated “core” subjects) are necessary for preparing students to be successful, only reading, writing, and math skills are evaluated for AYP. The long-term effects of NCLB are not yet evident, but the short-term effects have been detrimental to all nontested subjects, especially those courses that are typically considered electives.

Specific problems for arts classes have stemmed from a combination of the manner in which states have carried out NCLB assessments and the funding process that was used prior to NCLB. These problems have changed how administrators and teachers approach arts classes in respect to funding, professional development, and scheduling.

FUNDING

The primary challenge to schools in how NCLB is funded relates to the AYP benchmarks that schools and districts must meet. AYP benchmarks are intended to show that students who were previously not performing well are receiving ad-

equated instruction. When a school fails to meet benchmarks in any number of subcategories, the school is first assigned a probationary status and then has another chance to achieve the new goals before losing funding. In that probationary time, the school, the district, or both are required to formulate strategies, using their own funds, to bring failing students up to the benchmark level (Chapman 2004, 3). These strategies can include, but are not limited to, using existing resources to provide students with extra tutoring either during or outside the school day.

In 2007, the Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL) cost the state \$113 million—a sum that, at the time, equaled 1,600 new teaching positions (Kenny 2008). As I wrote this article, districts all over the state of Washington attempted to balance their budgets because of the economic downturn and shortfalls in tax revenue. Many of those districts eliminated teaching positions as a result, despite the use of stimulus money. Although the WASL will be replaced by a less costly assessment developed by the new state superintendent, if districts had not been required to use their own resources to pay for the test (OSPI 2009), then how many teaching positions could have been saved? Surely the loss of classroom teachers will not help any struggling district reach benchmarks, because, even with a modified test, Washington will have to prove AYP.

As budgets are cut nationwide, the funding for nontested subjects are affected first, because the majority of resources are directed at the areas that are tested for accountability (Schneider 2005, 56; Pederson 2007, 287). Arts may be tested under NCLB, but only *as funds permit* (Schneider 2005, 56). Because AYP only measures math and reading skills, schools have no incentive to test any other subjects. Achievement in other areas would not affect funding and, therefore, schools also have no incentive to fund them properly. The

consequences for the arts include everything from the elimination of instrument repair budgets to the loss of entire teaching positions and programs.

With the increased pressure on building administrators to get the most value for their staff dollars, arts teachers are encouraged—and sometimes required—to incorporate tested subjects into their curricula (Chapman 2004, 3). A study by Frierson-Campbell (2007, 33) found that 72 percent of the participating music teachers were involved in professional development that focused on arts integration into other subject areas. Some principals strive to hire arts teachers who are trained in reading and mathematics integration (Gerber and Gerrity 2007, 17). This trend could endanger the arts, especially music, from being recognized as a distinct and separate subject matter with its own skills and concepts (Gerber and Gerrity 2007, 17).

SCHEDULING

Anecdotal evidence that the high-stakes testing environment has affected the scheduling practices of schools abounds. In my own district, for instance, it is a common practice for seventh- and eighth-grade students to lose their only elective class if they fail the state test. The elective course is replaced with a remedial math or reading class that is intended to help raise scores. Although other strategies could be adopted, such as after-school tutoring, this solution provides the least amount of disruption to the school day and also costs the least amount of money. Therefore, from an administrative standpoint, elective replacement seems a logical solution. However, in a class such as a music ensemble, in which each student relies on the others for success, this kind of policy sabotages the success of the entire group, particularly if students are pulled out or added midyear. In other arts classes, a student who is withdrawn may lose his or her only outlet for creative expression, and may therefore lose interest in school altogether.

Additionally, remedial teachers, as well as principals, use “enrichment” (i.e., nontested or arts) subjects to bribe or reward classes (Dillon 2006; Chapman 2004, 3) by reminding students that they can return to their “fun” class if they work hard in the remedial class. Although this inducement may help motivate the student at that moment, the underlying message is that the arts do not require skill, knowledge, commitment, or work, and that as long as a student produces something, the quality of performance does not matter. This kind of comment also ignores the state and national arts standards for grade-appropriate performance. Students who remain in arts and music classes receive the message that the effort they have put into learning these subjects is not valued. Finally, treating arts classes as merely “fun” courses undermines the professionalism and knowledge of any arts educator, casting them as peripheral, rather than essential, players in a students’ educations. These attitudes are

underlined by NCLB’s allowance of schools to bypass traditional undergraduate teacher training by hiring “teaching artists” in place of certificated arts educators (Chapman 2004, 3).

The scheduling problems caused by NCLB are more far-reaching than just student class placement, although that is generally the first symptom noticed by classroom teachers. Some middle schools have changed their bell schedules to match high school schedules, offering longer, but fewer, class periods (Gerber and Gerrity 2007, 17). Other schools have reduced their course offerings to only physical education, math, and reading (Dillon 2006). A survey administered by The Council for Basic Education (2004) of elementary school principals, as cited by Abril and Gault (2006, 6) and Chapman (2004, 3), found that since the passage of NCLB, instructional time for tested subjects in 75 percent of those schools had increased and instructional time for the arts had decreased. The survey included schools from all fifty states, indicating that this problem is a national trend that is not limited to just a few states or urban or high-risk areas, although Dillon (2007), Chapman (2004, 3), and Frierson-Campbell (2007, 33) suggest that the effects are more exaggerated in those schools. It is troubling that these issues are more prevalent in at-risk populations, because these same students typically benefit the most from a rich and diverse curriculum.

The push for higher math and reading scores has even affected the types of activities offered in pre-K early education (Persellin 2007, 54). And although school boards and upper-level administrators have expressed concern that enough emphasis is not placed on a well-rounded curriculum, they are influenced by the threat of funding cuts. This reality forces administrators, regardless of their personal philosophies about arts education, to prioritize scheduling around those subjects that are tested (Gerber and Gerrity 2007, 17; Frierson-Campbell 2007, 33).

WILL NCLB EVER “GO AWAY”?

Veteran teachers who have seen educational fads come and go frequently ask this question. However, because of the bipartisan support NCLB enjoyed when it was originally passed, no politician has moved to reform the legislation, besides suggesting that it be better funded or that consequences be less punitive and more constructive. President Obama has clearly designated education as one of his top three priorities. He has also said on numerous occasions that providing children with a well-rounded education that prepares students for college and future jobs needs to be our primary focus in education. These goals are both admirable and necessary, but how do we educate students for the jobs of tomorrow when our priorities are focused so narrowly on elementary reading skills and arithmetic? How does this curriculum prepare students for a college education that encompasses humanities,

social sciences, and arts? Is our goal simply to get students to college, or to help them *succeed* in and graduate from college?

The *New York Times* quoted one Texas superintendent as saying, “It’s like basketball. If you can’t make lay-ups, then you’ve got to work on lay-ups” (Dillon 2006). Although this gentleman was defending the amount of time devoted in the schools to intensive reading and math to fix test scores, his comparison of these areas to a single skill in basketball is ironic. I have yet to see a basketball team win a game by exclusively using lay-ups to score points. In the same way, if we focus exclusively on reading and math—however important these subjects may be—we will never meet the goals of educating children to be successful in anything but the most menial tasks and jobs.

If NCLB is to succeed in its original publicized purpose, which was to close the achievement gap in education, we must not focus on high-stakes testing as our sole measurement of success. The tests do not measure anything that helps educators close that gap, nor do they reveal circumstances that are beyond the teacher’s control that can affect the outcome of the test. In addition, when a school is classified as “failing” after not demonstrating AYP for two consecutive years, schools have only three months to plan and one year to evidence AYP (Chapman 2004, 3). This timetable is common in the business world, where changes must be made quickly and better results recorded in a short period of time. But is the business model really what we want to use in public education? The business model does not take into account the vastly differing needs of students, which vary from year to year and may require accommodations and adjustments that stretch beyond a single year. In her 2004 article, Chapman notes that fiscal conservatives who believe that the public school system is both too expensive and mismanaged rely on sources such as Friedman’s economic theory of democracy to support their view. This view intends to characterize all public schools as failing and, therefore, in need of privatization. The implication is that NCLB is, at its core, intended to demonstrate a need for a privatized school system in the United States to educate all children equally. In a privatized system, however, students are not allowed to transcend the horizons of their parents. Choices only benefit those people who have the motivation, resources, or opportunities to take advantage of them. In other words, a free market system in education does not allow the same kind of access that a socialized, public system does. Public school may be the only place where at-risk students can access the arts without having to pay for them. The business or privatized education model turns students into workplace “investments,” and only easily evaluated and marketable skills are valued and therefore taught. If we marginalize all nontested subjects, we create a system in which only the most affluent members of our society have access to the most comprehensive and well-rounded educations, which widens the achievement gap, rather than closes it.

SOLUTIONS

There is a need for better advocacy by music educators to their administrators and legislators. NCLB allows, but does not require, arts to be tested, because the arts are considered a “core” subject and thus have academic status. Because funding is tied to achievement in only reading and math, all nonassessed subjects receive less attention in the schools, regardless of the status assigned to them by law. To maintain the arts’ status within the curriculum, some states assess their programs, but not for accountability. The Classroom Based Assessment (CBA) given by the state of Washington to all arts and social studies classes is an example of this kind of accountability. Pressure is put on educators to give the entire assessment, which, for music, involves time-consuming evaluation of student performances by use of individual student video recordings. The only data given to the state, however, is the total number of students who were given the assessment, not how many failed or passed. Besides the consumption of valuable instruction time, another problem with this approach is that to assess music objectively, only the most basic of skills can be measured, which does not take into account the ineffable factors that make the arts distinct from other subjects and that we strive to help our students experience. In addition, it is difficult to assess something that is not funded or supported equally from state to state, district to district, or even school to school. Too many discrepancies exist between music programs to assess them objectively and fairly. Simply adding music and other arts to the testing schedule is not an effective move. We cannot use a checklist of technical skills to define who is learning music and who is not.

Arts educators must also be better trained to access money from grants and government funds instead of relying solely on local money for support (Ashford 2004, 22). This money should be used for curricular materials, necessary maintenance of classroom equipment, and professional development—resources to which teachers of other subjects have access, but that have been cut from district budgets. It would be well worth the time and effort required for state and regional Music Educator’s National Conference (MENC) organizations to hire grantwriters to give workshops at conferences.

Most important, because the public expects holds the schools responsible for providing a comprehensive and high-quality education, more long-term empirical research needs to be conducted on the effects of NCLB. We are just beginning to understand the short-term effects of this legislation, which allows us to advocate for reform or adjustments. But without long-term data, educators can never determine whether the positive or negative effects they experience are an anomaly in their own building, or if they are part of a bigger trend. To fully advocate for the education the public expects us to provide, we must change those aspects of NCLB that do not work and that prevent us from providing the best education possible. If we continue as if NCLB is

just a trend that will disappear in a few years, we may turn today's short-term effects into tomorrow's long-term problems. And, in the meantime, how many children will we leave behind?

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