

An Unbalanced Diet: The Faults of the Mississippi Education System

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The stereotype that jocks and artists cannot be conventionally intelligent is long gone. According to research conducted by the College Board, students who participate frequently in visual art classes “have average higher verbal and math SAT scores than those taking no arts.” In fact, there was a documented “100-point gap in SAT scores between students who had music instruction during their early elementary school years and students who did not.” Not only do students taking art perform better on academic tests, but visual art classes also help students develop significant skills such as “mental imagery,” “personal voice,” “observation,” and “critical judgment.” Students participating in physical education notice similarly positive results in their cognitive development, such as “improved attention,” “improved information processing, storage, and retrieval,” and “enhanced coping, according to the CDC. While the benefits of both physical and visual education is recognized nationally, many state regulations do not support a balanced diet of P.E. and art classes for students. According to the Mississippi Department of Education, public elementary schools require daily physical education for all students; yet, specific degree- holding physical educators are not required. In essence, standard classroom teachers lacking physical education degrees are teaching their students athletics. Art

classes are not even required in Mississippi public schools; in fact, many schools do not have an art program. Considering that cognitive development is at its prime during the early years of childhood, it is identifiably detrimental that Mississippi does not provide its students with the proper methods to achieve positive growth. Instead, Mississippi is focusing on academics, and punishing schools with lower test scores by removing funding for art and physical education courses.

Wanda Quon, the president of Pecan Park Elementary, an elementary school that lost funding for art classes and physical education, elaborated on her school’s situation.

“We no longer have an art or P.E. teacher, Quon said. “The classroom teacher is expected to teach art and P.E. as part of the instructional day.”

Specifically, the lack of art teachers has proved detrimental to student learning, because the classroom teachers are not equipped to incorporate art into the standard school day.

“Teaching art requires more skill and unfortunately, but understandably, most teachers are more focused on the core curriculum than on art,” Quon said.

Mississippi public schools are not the only places where artistic education has been decreased. For example, St. Andrew’s, known for its top-notch liberal arts education, decreased the amount of required art credits from 4 to 3.

While this modification did not completely limit students' access to fine arts, there was a recent movement to decrease the art requirement even further. Middle School Art Teacher Ann Brock championed the effort against this attempted reform.

"This was when my political background of doing grassroots work kicked in, and providing research to all the parties involved to say: 'This is why you can't cut it,'" Brock said.

Not only is Brock's strong belief in artistic education supported by research, but she has also seen firsthand art's affect on student development.

"It is something as simple as opening up their creativity and thinking outside the box; it's almost like loosening their brain," Brock said. "Something along the lines of critical thinking skills and problem solving; especially if they are working with sculptures and they've got to figure out 'how am I going to get this to stand on its own, how can it be balanced? They have to pull from parts of their brain that they don't think

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they are going to have to use in art, yet they do.”

While there is not a generally accepted quota for how long students should spend daily on visual art, it is recognized that physical education is a daily necessity. Indeed, as seen in the phrase popularized by the Former First Lady of the United States and Health Advocate Michelle Obama, “60 minutes of play” is the standard amount of time that kids should participate in physical activity each day. However, according to district and state standards, students in grades K-5 are only required to have 150 minutes of PE per week, which strays quite far from the national standard. While “60 minutes of play” is important to keep kids healthy, physical education is better for more than increased physical health. According to the World Economic Forum, “physical activity can increase the size of children's brains and improve academic performance.” And unfortunately, in Mississippi public schools, not only are children losing

the ability to perform well academically due to the lack of physical education, but they are also losing the opportunity to pursue athletics later on.

Physical education in the elementary level provides the stepping-stones for a continuation of physical activity in higher education. Kids that are exposed to this type of education will open themselves to opportunities to play sports later on that can provide them with intangible lessons. Head of the SA Girls' Basketball Team Burney King discussed why basketball is important to his athletes.

"In basketball, it's five people who have to work in unison to get something accomplished," King said. "It's the same thing as working in an office, or any group work you have to do academically."

Not only do students that play sports learn valuable lessons such as teamwork, but they are also removed from the rigor and stress of the school day for a short period of time.

"P.E. can give our students a 'brain break', which helps children to focus for longer periods of time and consequently, affects student learning," Quon said.

While the importance of education has been at the forefront of national attention for decades, it is only a recent revelation that art and athletics have been accepted as fundamental parts of education. Premier educators have paved the way in their inclusion of arts in the classroom. According to the Boston Globe, the Yale School of Medicine “requires students to scrutinize paintings in a museum to improve their skills at observation and empathy.” Other top-tier universities such as Harvard and Penn State have followed suit in their requirement of art education. These universities are also seeking out students that demonstrate propensities for artistic thought, recognizing the value of a creative, ingenious student body. In a time when educated professionals are needed more than ever, childhood development is pertinent. Unfortunately, Mississippi is not living up to the standard of properly educating its youth. Perhaps it is time to investigate how our community expects to deliver productive members of society without taking sufficient measures to educate our youth. Physical education and art classes are significant parts of childhood development, and it is time that Mississippi recognizes these less standard forms of education as essential.