

## **Budgets Over Brains: Reassessing Alabama's Art Education Fund**

August Floyd was a member of the Holly Pond High School Marching Band in Cullman, Alabama in 2020. She said the band helped her come out of her shell, make new friends, and strive for academic success. Floyd emphasized how a lack of arts education funding prevented other kids from participating in band because they could not afford it.

The Alabama Education Trust Fund budgets \$70 million to four of the core subjects – reading, math, science, and technology. The fifth core subject, the arts, receives \$1.3 million for approximately 750,000 kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade Alabama students. Arts education includes music, visual art, theater, choir, and dance.

Alabama school administrators and teachers said Alabama's education budget has low funding for arts and other subjects because the state has one of the lowest property tax rates in the country. The majority of education funding occurs from sales tax. Sales taxes are unstable because they fluctuate depending on the economy. Schools also face funding limitations after the stock market crashed in 2008. Educators said the lack of money is hurting students by not providing creative outlets that enhance critical thinking and communication skills.

There are approximately 1,500 schools in Alabama, and 70% do not have arts education programs during school hours or after as extracurricular activities said Alabama Art Alliance (AAA) Executive Director Donna Russell. She said the group's main goal is to advocate for more money to provide arts courses during the school day.

AAA speaks with legislators and community organizations about the academic and character growth that children experience in arts education. The alliance is committed to providing access to arts learning and activities in Alabama. The group strives to build awareness of opportunities and resources for training ~~for the state~~ with the Alabama Institute for Education in the Arts.

These groups provide professional development courses that teach educators how to integrate the arts into the core curriculum.

### **Benefits from Arts Education**

Melody Hager, an educator and music counselor in North Carolina, has seen arts education improve students' educations firsthand. One of her students had speech problems that improved by singing music, which stimulated his brain to combine articulation with timing. Hager acknowledged her school's higher funding for arts education in Charlotte, North Carolina, but she pointed out that there are various tools and programs that teachers and schools can find. Hager said, "They are free and easy to use. People don't know about them."

Hager said introducing children to art at an early age is impactful. She noted how the arts can correlate with other core subjects as early as three years old – "staying in time and learning signatures that are all math, and it's hidden in plain sight which is neat. It sparks that kind of academic interest earlier. The ABC song is a prime example of how students utilize rhythm, speech, and memorization as learning tools."

Like Hager, Rachel Ostrander encourages parents to get children involved early to foster brain development. Ostrander is an advocate and instructor of arts education integration in Olympia,

Washington. She explained that there is a community group in Olympia that provides opportunities for students without art programs at their schools. Still, they have to have at-home support to function correctly. Underfunded groups financially strain parents, as they become responsible for purchasing instruments and music.

Ostrander said that parents often become the leaders of fundraising and production due to a lack of school system support. Parent organizations have partially taken the lead due to 90% of arts education teachers being laid off in Central Washington when COVID-19 hit. They are relying on volunteers for arts education now more than ever. Olympia's arts community strives to provide programs through virtual learning and district meetings but is getting pushed down the legislative agenda due to other educational reforms, Ostrander said.

### **Advocacy and Funding**

Russell said storytelling is essential when advocating for the arts. Russell said advocating increased the arts education budget for arts education in Alabama:

We started at \$500,000. It's better than nothing. That \$500,000 was used to distribute funds in grants to schools around the state. The line item increased from \$500,000 to \$1.3 million because people advocated and tried to show our legislators the effects that arts education can have.

Russell said that art students' stories are most effective when talking to state officials. Cullman High School student Laci New agrees that informing others of arts education benefits will bring more funding.

New expressed the neglect that many art students feel from their peers every day. She used the example of the theatre troupe putting on a production ~~on~~ during school and seeing the athletes being dismissed for practice when the "art kids" are not dismissed from sports functions to go rehearse. She described these little actions as displays of disrespect for the group's talent and contribution to the community. New said, "The students see adults overlook the arts as something valuable and, in turn, reflect that behavior. I don't think it's intentional but then again, why are we subconsciously dismissing children?"

### **COVID-19 Adds Fuel to the Fire**

Hanceville High School music students Brady and Ella Absher said COVID-19 made having successful arts programs more difficult. Ella said the main issue was not social distancing but the inability to host fundraisers. Art programs require students to fundraise due to the lack of institutional funding. COVID-19 prevented selling products and hosting events where community members contribute.

Brady explained that virtual learning contributed to the difficulty of fundraising and performing. He said that the students are rarely together and that they can't communicate easily. There's not enough money to provide all students with online access to band classes.

Organizations across Alabama are trying to give students virtual learning opportunities. Ansley Frachiseur of Alabama Symphony Orchestra (ASO) said its outreach is broader due to virtual meetings. Frachiseur said ASO is headquartered in Birmingham and that reaching musicians in

North and South Alabama has always been demanding due to travel limitations. Although the group has figured out operations, it is still struggling to find financial stability for its outreach.

ASO is no longer putting on concerts or events to generate revenue and relies on donations.

Franchiseur said one of the most important actions someone can take amid COVID-19 to support arts education is to advocate and donate, whether for the ASO or another arts organization.

There is passion behind advocacy for arts education across the nation. Alabama arts organizations, educators, and students hope to see funding and core curriculum development. Expression and learning through the arts lead students to take innovative approaches to critical thinking and communication.

### **Sources**

Arts Education Policy and Funding: [www.americansforthearts.org/by-program/reports-and-data/legislation-policy/legislative-issue-center/arts-education-policy-and-funding](http://www.americansforthearts.org/by-program/reports-and-data/legislation-policy/legislative-issue-center/arts-education-policy-and-funding)

Education Trust Fund Appropriation Comparison Sheet for FY 2019: [http://lsa.state.al.us/PDF/LFO/FY2019/E TF/ETF-FY-2019- cc-rpt.pdf](http://lsa.state.al.us/PDF/LFO/FY2019/E%20TF/ETF-FY-2019-cc-rpt.pdf)