



Newspaper stories

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Electives teach most valuable lessons

By Patrick Welsh

Every day now on the morning announcements at T.C. Williams High School in Alexandria, Va., I hear what has become a school mantra: "Study hard for those SOLs" -- the state Standards of Learning exams that will be coming up in a few weeks.

When I look around my class and see kids chuckling, I can't help but feel how out of touch schools are with the real lives of the kids entrusted to their care. Obsessed with the results of so-called high-stakes testing (which, in fact, have turned into minimum competency tests that almost any middle-class kid can pass with a modicum of effort), educators have forgotten that what schools offer outside the classroom also is essential to a total education.

As schools face budget crunches and states, in a misguided attempt to raise standards, load their curriculums with more science, math and social-studies requirements, programs in music, drama and journalism are the first to face budget cuts or, in some cases, elimination. From California to Massachusetts, parents have had to organize to save performing arts programs, often raising or donating money themselves to keep the programs alive.

For example, due to budget constraints, the music program in the North Sacramento School District faces elimination after barely surviving last year. The school board in Massachusetts' Westborough school district voted to require students to pay fees for playing sports and other extracurricular activities. And New York City last year cut junior high schools' art, music and other electives, blaming new standardized curriculum requirements.

President Bush restated the importance of his No Child Left Behind Act and testing standards in his recent State of the Union speech. But no one seems to be talking about these other programs. That's too bad. Kids usually get infinitely more out of being involved in the school play, orchestra or newspaper than they do from a regular class. These activities should be emphasized, not shoved aside. They are something students feel they have a stake in.

Educational theorist Jerome Bruner maintained that "we get interested in what we get good at." A complete education would give every kid an opportunity to find what he or she is good at. Unfortunately, schools are providing only a fraction of their students the opportunities for the kind of challenge, self-discovery, confidence and camaraderie that drama, band or other activities afford.

No one knows this better than some of the best students in my senior English classes. Take Sarah Ball, a National Merit semifinalist and editor of the school newspaper who says she spends more than twice as much time on the newspaper as on any classroom subject.

"No matter how good the teacher, the classroom is too structured and confining," she says. "With extracurricular activities, you take the initiative; you are there because you choose to be there. Once

you learn how to play the game, the report card with all A's and no absences is just a piece of paper. . . . It can't compare to the rush, the natural high, the sense of team and personal accomplishment I get when I hold the final edition of the newspaper in my hands."

Julianna Glassco, who has been in plays and musicals since the seventh grade, agrees: "School is just preparing for tests, getting the grades. In drama, you can act or dance or direct or do makeup or be a 'techie' and do sound and lighting. You get to discover things you never knew about yourself or about others."

Year after year, when I go to school plays or orchestra recitals, I have been stunned to see talents that I had no idea my students had. One recent Friday night, when I went to see a student-directed one-act play, I saw a far different Lauren Abramson from the serious, hard-nosed scholar in my first-period class. On stage, she drew laughs from the audience as she slipped seamlessly in and out of three crazy comic roles, each with distinctive accents: a New Yorker, a Southerner and a Hungarian. For Lauren, who has been accepted early at the University of Virginia, the classroom is "too predictable. What I like about drama is the tension, the challenge," she says. "No two performances are ever the same."

A couple of weeks ago, the kids in my seventh-period class discovered something about their classmate Cassie Stoddard that they are not likely to forget. Cassie, a first violinist for the 2003 Virginia state orchestra, volunteered to bring her violin to class and play *Ashokan Farewell*, the melancholy theme song to the Ken Burns PBS series on the Civil War, parts of which we had watched in class while reading *The Killer Angels*. I could see some students thought it would be a colossal bore. But as soon as Cassie hit the first note, jaws dropped. Her playing had a richness and power that astounded everyone. Cassie is a National Merit semifinalist, was accepted early at Yale, etc. But for her, nothing is more important than her orchestra experience. "Music is the perfect complement to the classroom," she says. "It helps me shift gears, to lose myself in the feel of the music and the group dynamic."

One of Cassie's fondest memories was playing in New York's Carnegie Hall last year with the American Youth Philharmonic. "I can't describe the thrill it gave me," she says. But it is a thrill she never would have experienced had the school system not given her the opportunity to take violin lessons in the fourth grade.

In determining priorities at a time when money for schools is scarce, politicians and educators would do well to remember the experiences of Cassie Stoddard, Julianna Glassco and Sarah Ball. What the experiences of those young women tell me is that schools that do not educate the whole person are not doing their job. Indeed, they have the lowest of standards, no matter how many students pass so-called high-stakes state exams.

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