

Arts in Education

May 2014

I recently attended the Elementary Choral Festival at Southeast High School and look forward to this event every year. Chorus members from all 13 of our elementary schools come together to form a countywide chorus. They work with school choral directors to prepare a concert for the public. If you have never attended, it is a delightful experience well worth planning to attend next spring.

As I watched the faces of the children, both those performing and those in the audience, I saw excitement and enthusiasm for music. Children and adults were totally involved in the musical experience. You could see the pride in the eyes of the students as they sang. They felt good about their part in the performance and their self-confidence soared.

This month I also enjoyed attending plays at some of our middle and high schools, as well as musical events at some of our elementary schools. Visit our middle schools to see outstanding student artwork on display. It is amazing to see the talent our young people possess and their eagerness to engage in these fine arts activities. Often the shyest of students will blossom when given the opportunity to sing, dance, act, or create works of art. It is remarkable when I see how willing our teachers are to work many tireless hours guiding students in these areas.

Reflecting on the value of music and the arts, I couldn't help but consider the fact that this is often the first thing cut during budget talks. When a school system budget is financially constrained, the focus is to provide resources for what are considered the essential subjects like math, reading, social studies and science. I believe music and fine arts are also essential if we want to equip our students with skills that will provide lifelong social and emotional benefits. Music and the arts can keep students engaged in school to help develop well-rounded individuals.

Research documents the value of Fine Arts education to a child's growth and learning. Studies show the arts increase a student's ability to think and solve problems. They foster creativity, discipline, and individuality. Students who perform in a band or choral group learn teamwork and cohesiveness. Fine Arts, like athletics, can keep students engaged in school and nurture skills that are vital for success in life. Encounters with the arts stimulate young minds, promote dreams, and expand their horizons.

We wish the school district were better able to support the arts and appreciate how students in Whitfield County, Dalton City, and Murray County schools have benefited through the years from the Oscar N. Jonas Memorial Foundation founded in 1968. Mr. Jonas aspired to provide cultural enrichment for all children through sponsorship of the visual, performing, and literary arts. The Foundation works in partnership with PTOs and the Creative Arts Guild to provide programs free for students during the school year. The Foundation's primary focus is the support of an In-School Residency Program that places artists in the three area school systems each year. The generosity of sponsors in our community makes this vision a reality.

For several days after the elementary concert, I thought about the importance music played in my own life and the lives of my children. I was fortunate to have piano lessons as a child, but it was in my adult years that I really began to appreciate what music could do for me. I often turn to the piano when I am mad, stressed, sad, or happy. The true value of my music is that it is a major source of personal enjoyment and fulfillment for me. My husband always said he could tell my mood by how hard I hit the keys! I may never be an accomplished pianist, but the amount of skill is not as important as the value music brings to my life.

Only a small minority of our students may choose a career in the area of Fine Arts; however, all of our students can experience the benefits during school. Some of these benefits are higher self-esteem, motivation, aesthetic awareness, creativity, emotional support, and appreciation of diversity through our schools' Fine Arts programs. These are the specialties that will bring us together as a people and will be part of every American's cultural heritage. The arts are what make us most human - most complete as people. We must continue to provide funds and offer this advantage to our children.