

Dear Board of Trustees / Mr. Anderson / Mr. Eggen / Mr. Miranda,

Many schools are beginning their planning for schedules and priorities for the upcoming school year, conversations spurred on by budgetary conversations. Music Education is oftentimes found arguing for its existence during these conversations, but we can do better than this. This time I ask you to help reframe the conversation, as research is clear about the benefits of music education for our students. I'd rather instead focus on discussing with you ways in which our programs should *grow and prosper*, not just survive.

I believe it is important to remind ourselves of what the goal of our community is in regards to the education of our children. In my view, we are charged with at least these four things:

- **We're teaching our students to have an Entrepreneurial Spirit** — far different than simply preparing them for the global workforce. We are preparing them for jobs that *do not exist yet* due to the speed at which technology is changing the world, so using an "Industrial Revolution model" of education is no longer appropriate.
- **We're preparing them to be Ethical Citizens.**
- **We're teaching our students to be Engaged Thinkers.** We need our students to have abilities that cannot be produced by machines. Students need to have the capacity to innovate, create and solve problems in ways that technology cannot achieve on its own in sensitive and responsible ways.
- **Perhaps most importantly, we're helping students more fully realize their humanity.** People who can enjoy more fully those experiences that are uniquely human such as beauty can think creatively and in innovative ways about the three points listed above.

Oftentimes music advocates such as myself are thrust into conversations about the tangible benefits of arts education to ensure it remains a vital part of our public education system. In this case, we need to discuss more about how the arts can become a more vital part of the system in tangible *and* intangible (non-tested) ways. Here are reasons I believe music and the arts have a profound impact on our school system, and some ideas on how to ensure every child in Alberta has access to quality music education.

Music is a core part of our life, an essential part of our human-ness. Before we discuss ways music and the arts "helps" academics, let's first make a strong statement as a school community that all young people should participate in the arts because it's central to every human society on earth and has an unbelievably important role in every aspect of culture; including history, literature, media and ways in which we communicate. The intrinsic value of the arts and their role in our daily lives and society — and the importance of helping young people understand and appreciate that value and role — should be at the forefront of our educators' and administrators' minds.

Music education is one of the few venues where students learn to collaborate and respect one another. Students learn to be aware of and to value differences between one another, and to share their differences with one another to produce a mutually desirable outcome. In music, students are systematically taught to be Ethical Citizens.

Music education is the only area of study that develops connections between both sides of the brain. It is no longer a question, but an immutable fact proven through mountains of research that music is the only activity that develops consistent and practiced interactions between both hemispheres of the brain. Young musicians are developing the ability to think in ways that employ all the skills available at their disposal simultaneously, allowing them to be Engaged Thinkers with an Entrepreneurial Spirit.

Music education can close our achievement gap. The definition of our Achievement Gap has almost everything to do with the results of standardized testing. While I personally believe that a student's success should not be determined by test scores, let's play that game while referencing some data:

Not only do the arts improve standardized test scores, a 2012 report from the National Endowment for the Arts showed that, by nearly every indicator studied, a student from a low-socioeconomic (SES) background with a high-arts educational experience significantly outperformed peers from a low-arts, low-SES background, closing (and in some cases eliminating) the gap that often appears between low-SES students and their more advantaged

peers. These improvements were in graduation rates, college attendance and completion rates, and science and writing scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in the United States of America.

My point is that we have tried giving SES students “more school” to boost test scores, and not only has it barely worked — it’s not making them like school any more than they already do (and many are miserable). What if we engaged them in an artistic and creative manner *and test scores go up as a result?*

Top-down mandates are one thing, but implementation in the classroom is another. If our scheduling and human resources decisions are based on arbitrary mandates, educational fads or the priorities of boisterous lobby groups, our children lose. Whatever our educational leaders say about the arts, they measure achievement through math and language arts scores, not drawing proficiency or music skills. It’s no surprise then that certain politicians and lobbyists have zeroed in on standardized tests. We can do better, and we have the capacity to decide to be ahead of the curve regarding education reform if we choose to do so.

We need to narrow the “opportunity gap.” While we continue to keep up with mandates, fads and lobby group demands, our economically disadvantaged kids lose out big time. They are the ones who see more contact time in academic subjects at the expense of the music and the arts, yet they are the ones who may benefit most from music’s benefits: enhanced brain development, spatial/visual/temporal processing, improving memory and attention, physical coordination, personal discipline and teamwork. Consider the fact that students with access to arts education have higher attendance rates and lower drop out rates, and that the arts engage the parents and families of students who are involved in performances and recitals. The arts should be made available to such at-risk students in abundance.

Creativity is learned and it must be a habit, so we need to create innovative school schedules. Like any other learned skill, creativity must become a habit in order for it to “stick”. One day a week of the arts in the school schedule, especially in the earlier grades, is a far shot from teaching creativity. One semester per year of instruction in the arts is a far shot from developing lifelong learners and lifelong creators. If creativity is indeed a priority for the students of Alberta, it should be reflected in the scheduling and in the course requirements of students.

We need to train every single teacher in the arts. A curriculum rich in the arts is a more engaging curriculum for all. Active decisions need to be made to see students instructed by qualified *music educators*, not educators who happen to be musicians or musicians with a limited understanding of how to educate. These individuals are trained to help students systematically develop creativity, and can bring art and music into their students’ everyday classroom experience. Through such professional development, our teachers can learn to teach the “whole child” and reach students who may struggle with traditional approaches to learning — students who have been “lost” in our test-rich system until now. This will be some of the best money we have ever spent for our schools.

I am writing this because, like you, I want to see the students in our schools succeed, and I’ve seen first-hand the powerful impact arts education can have on students’ academic success and enjoyment of learning. You can see it for yourself at Notre Dame Collegiate in High River, either by perusing their Music Department’s website at <http://music.ndcfinearts.ca>, or by visiting the school and conversing with the students. An education in the arts exposes students to a variety of cultures while enriching their learning experience and teaching them how to be empathetic, tolerant and open to working with others — all necessary skills for success in our multi-cultural society.

Music and arts education should not be a luxury in any school division. Creativity isn’t only reserved for artists and musicians, so let’s turn this problem on its head and share the fact that arts education is essential for every child. Learning to create and appreciate visual and aural aesthetics is more important than ever before to the development of the next generation of great thinkers, innovators, and human beings.

We have tried the way of the almighty test. Let’s try something different.

Sincerely,

An Optimistic Parent