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Laura Jarasek

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The Every Student Succeeds Act and Its Impact on Music Education

By Laura Jarasek*

“Music does bring people together No matter what language we speak, what color we are, the form of our politics, or the expression of our love and our faith, music proves: We are the same.” - John Denver¹

Introduction

Research has shown that engaging children in music-based activities can advance empathy, increasing a child’s ability to consider the emotions of others.² Actions as simple as creating rhythms in an ensemble teach children to align their goals with others and experience a common aim.³ Because everyone can feel a rhythm and respond, music and rhythm also create a shared experience regardless of a child’s linguistic skills.⁴ Furthermore, music is needed to impact the rhythm of our society today, by slowing down our communications to make room for understanding. Music requires a person to consider the talents of others and work together, despite differences, to create a work of art that everyone can be proud of. Creating music is an experience that teaches people that different voices, sounds, cultures, languages, and points of view can come together harmoniously. All of these life lessons are essential to a healthy society, and the government is finally taking notice.

The United States government has recently recognized the importance of music education through its passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA).⁵ The ESSA’s passage was a historic victory for music education advocates because it included for the first time a specific and separate

* J.D. Candidate, 2019, Saint Louis University School of Law

¹ MUSIC SAYINGS AND QUOTES, <http://www.wiseoldsayings.com/music-quotes/> (last visited Oct. 18, 2017).

² MUSIC OF KINDNESS: PLAYING TOGETHER STRENGTHENS EMPATHY IN CHILDREN (June 13, 2012), <http://www.cam.ac.uk/research/news/music-of-kindness-playing-together-strengthens-empathy-in-children> (last visited Oct. 18, 2017).

³ *Id.*

⁴ *Id.*

⁵ The Every Student Succeeds Act: What it is, What it Means, and What’s Next, NAT’L ASS’N FOR MUSIC EDUC., <https://nafme.org/wp-content/files/2015/11/ESSA-In-Plain-EnglishFINAL-2-2016.pdf> (last visited Oct. 18, 2017).

mention of music as part of a “well-rounded education.”⁶ In fact, this new law, which took effect on August 1, 2016, completely changed the standard from the previous No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB).⁷ The NCLB focused on academic success only as defined by performance in reading and math.⁸ In contrast, the ESSA does not require any particular subjects to be studied; it instead requires public schools (K-12) to make a reasonable effort to give students exposure to a wide variety of subjects.⁹

Every Student Succeeds Act

The relevant portion of the Every Student Succeeds Act is as follows:

The term “well-rounded education” means courses, activities, and programming in subjects such as English, reading or language arts, writing, science, technology, engineering, mathematics, foreign languages, civics and government, economics, arts, history, geography, computer science, music, career and technical education, health, physical education, and any other subject as determined by the State or local educational agency, with the purpose of providing all students access to an enriched curriculum and educational experience.¹⁰

On March 13, 2017, United States Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos emphasized each State’s need to create a consolidated State plan implementing the new requirements under the ESSA.¹¹ DeVos stated that the State plan “promotes innovation, flexibility, transparency and accountability, and reduces burden to help ensure every child has a chance to learn and succeed.”¹² Furthermore, DeVos emphasized the fact that States are among the most critical actors working to ensure that every child has access to a quality education.¹³ This means that advocates for music

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ *Id.*

⁸ *Id.*

⁹ *Id.*

¹⁰ Every Student Succeeds Act 2016, §8002(52) (emphasis added), <https://nafme.org/wp-content/files/2015/11/Text-of-the-Every-Student-Succeeds-Act-S1177.pdf> (last visited Oct. 18, 2017).

¹¹ Letter from Betsy DeVos, U.S. Sec’y of Educ., to Chief State School Officers (Mar. 13, 2017), <https://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/guid/secletter/170313.html> (last visited Oct. 18, 2017).

¹² *Id.*

¹³ *Id.*

education, following the ESSA, need to look to their State plans to ensure music education is implemented. Since music is only one of the many subjects listed as part of a “well-rounded education”, it is important to remind State legislatures of the benefits of a music education because the States will ultimately decide whether music is funded in each State’s respective public school system.¹⁴

Music Education in State ESSA Plans

As of April 27, 2017, twelve states submitted State accountability plans to the U.S. Department of Education, and arts and music education were included in most of these first round plans.¹⁵ Seventy percent of the submitted plans address the arts as part of a “well-rounded education.”¹⁶ Several States, including Michigan, plan to use Title IV funds to “right inequities in access to arts education.”¹⁷ In addition, five states—Connecticut, Louisiana, Michigan, New Jersey, and Tennessee—specifically list arts education as part of what their Twenty-First Century Community Learning Center programs fund and support.¹⁸ Furthermore, six states are including access to arts education as a part of the State’s planned accountability system: Connecticut, Illinois, Louisiana, Massachusetts, and the District of Columbia.¹⁹ Finally, Nevada and New Jersey are including arts education data as part of their school report card system.²⁰

Overall, many states have started to recognize the importance of arts and music education. However, Missouri failed to emphasize music education in its recent ESSA plan.

Missouri's ESSA Plan

¹⁴ Every Student Succeeds Act 2016, §8002(52), <https://nafme.org/wp-content/files/2015/11/Text-of-the-Every-Student-Succeeds-Act-S1177.pdf> (last visited Oct. 18, 2017).

¹⁵ Lynn Tuttle, How Does Arts Education Fare in the First Round of State ESSA Plans?, EDUC. COMM’N OF THE STATES, <https://www.ecs.org/how-does-arts-education-fare-in-the-first-round-of-state-essa-plans/> (last visited Oct. 18, 2017).

¹⁶ *Id.*

¹⁷ *Id.*

¹⁸ *Id.*

¹⁹ *Id.*

²⁰ *Id.*

Missouri’s ESSA plan emphasized a need for advanced coursework such as trigonometry, calculus, statistics, physics, and advanced biology.²¹ Missouri intends to improve access to this coursework to all students, but particularly for minorities and economically disadvantaged students and for those whose rural school settings reduce their access.²² Their plan also included the following chart with specifics regarding the need for advanced classes.²³

Course	Number of high schools not offering the course in the last three years	Percentage of high schools not offering the course in the last three years	Number of Juniors and Seniors lacking access to course during the 2016-17 school year
Trigonometry	124	23.6%	10,508
Calculus	151	28.7%	3,833
Statistics	290	55.1%	13,537
Physics	451	85.7%	26,761
Advanced Biology	76	14.4%	2,211

In trying to provide advanced coursework to all students, Missouri seems to miss the mark when it comes to supporting music education and also when it comes to supporting students with different learning styles. Woodside, a reporter for Medium writes: “All children learn differently, and so it is pivotal that national education policy recognizes the need to provide students, particularly the most disadvantaged, with opportunities to partake in comprehensive and varied learning experiences.”²⁴ Woodside, therefore, emphasizes that there must be a balance in learning experiences in our public education system, and parents and educators should ask for more of a balanced plan to benefit as many students as possible. In short, to “improve coursework to all students,” Missouri needs to consider supporting diverse areas of study as well. Essentially, the students who excel in math and science will most likely excel in the advanced coursework listed above, leaving little opportunity for an artistically brilliant student.

²¹ MISSOURI'S CONSOLIDATED STATE PLAN (Sept. 18, 2017), <https://dese.mo.gov/sites/default/files/ESSA-Plan-Final.pdf> (last visited Oct. 18, 2017).

²² *Id.*

²³ *Id.*

²⁴ Christopher Woodside, In Every Student Succeeds Act, Music is Part of a Well-Rounded Education, MEDIUM (Jan. 29, 2016), <https://medium.com/@MarylanDChris/in-every-student-succeeds-act-music-is-part-of-a-well-rounded-education-befdb581e239> (last visited Oct. 18, 2017).

Finding balance is important, and it is apparent that, even though the ESSA provides that a “well-rounded education” includes music, not all States have actually incorporated music into their ESSA plans. Therefore, now is the time to make a change while the ESSA is new and while States are submitting first round plans. This is the time to ensure States find a place for musicians and creative students in their ESSA plans and education systems.

Advocacy

Excerpts from studies regarding the educational, cognitive, and social benefits of music education are provided below as a starting place for conversation with the State legislatures regarding some of the many reasons to include music education in state ESSA plans.

Educational Benefits²⁵

- Regardless of socioeconomic status or school district, students who participate in high-quality music programs score higher on reading and spelling tests.
- Schools that have music programs have an attendance rate of 93.3% compared to 84.9% in schools without music programs.
- Students in high-quality school music education programs score higher on standardized tests compared to students in schools with deficient music education programs, regardless of the socioeconomic level of community.
- The College Board identifies the arts as one of the six basic academic subject areas students should study in order to succeed in college.

Cognitive Benefits²⁶

- Young children who take music lessons show different brain development and improved memory over the course of a year, compared to those without musical training.

²⁵ Sharon Bryant, How Children Benefit From Music Education in Schools, NAMM FOUND. (June 9, 2014), <https://www.nammfoundation.org/articles/2014-06-09/how-children-benefit-music-education-schools> (last visited Oct. 18, 2017).

²⁶ *Id.*

- Music and math are highly intertwined. By understanding beat, rhythm, and scales, children are learning how to divide, create fractions, and recognize patterns.
- Certain instruments, such as percussion, help children develop coordination and motor skills.

Social Benefits

- Music opens up our awareness of differences and our recognition of similar universal themes and experiences among us.²⁷
- Children who study a musical instrument are more likely to excel in all of their studies, work better in teams, have enhanced critical thinking skills, stay in school, and pursue further education.²⁸

Closing Comments

Music education not only increases a child's capacity for empathy, but it also provides many other benefits regarding a child's cognitive and social development as well as educational benefits. The passage of the ESSA is a breakthrough for music education. However, it is necessary for music educators, parents, and other arts advocates to take advantage of this opportunity to advocate for the inclusion of music education in their respective State ESSA plans. There is a balance that needs to be struck regarding a State's financial support for music education and other subjects, especially in Missouri. However, for now, the passage of the ESSA establishing "music" as part of a "well-rounded education" provides hope for the future of music programs in public schools. The door has been opened for music educators to advocate for the arts in public school systems, and this is a reason to celebrate, perhaps with a song.

Edited by Luke Jackson

²⁷ Denise L. Levy and Daniel C. Byrd, *Why Can't We Be Friends? Using Music to Teach Social Justice*, *JOURNAL OF THE SCHOLARSHIP OF TEACHING AND LEARNING*, 64, 64–75 (Apr. 2011), <https://josotl.indiana.edu/article/view/1818/1815> (last visited Oct. 18, 2017).

²⁸ Bryant, *supra* note 25.

