

Obama Education Secretary Affirms Arts as 'Core Academic Subject'

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U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan has issued a letter to educators and community leaders emphasizing the importance of arts education in primary schools and outlining various federal funds, including economic stimulus money, available for arts programs.

The letter, released Aug. 13, has garnered somewhat mixed reactions from education leaders. Most think it is good news that the secretary understands that arts education is a "core academic subject," and some have been galvanized by the statement and hope that by spreading the news as far as possible, arts programs across the country can secure much-needed funding. Others think it will have little effect in preserving arts programs, especially with school administrators and policymakers struggling to balance state education budgets hit hard by the recession.

"Particularly in times when budgets are tough, we worry about the arts," Duncan said during a conference call with arts educators, advocates and reporters on Aug. 18, explaining why he issued the letter. "It's a real worry, that students aren't having that chance to have that well-rounded education appropriate for children, especially at a young age."

Duncan also cited the 2008 National Assessment of Education Progress report. The survey, completed in June 2009, showed that less than 60 percent of eighth-grade students attended schools with thrice-weekly music instruction. Less than half of the schools offered similar lessons in the visual arts. Federal mandates to improve standardized test scores in math, reading and science are often blamed for the limited opportunities.

In the letter, Duncan points out that under the Elementary

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and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), arts education is considered "a core academic subject and part of a complete education for all students." Duncan adds that several ESEA sections give states and local districts the flexibility to spend money on arts programs. Funds are also available under the Education Department's Arts in Education program and through various stimulus programs. It's "not correct" that these federal funds are limited to science, technology, engineering and mathematics subjects, as educators and budget-makers commonly believe, he said during the conference call. He urged communities to take the initiative to secure such money, as 90 percent of arts funding is managed by state and local agencies.

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—Arne Duncan, U.S. Secretary of Education

Supporters and skeptics

NAMM, the International Music Products Association, is among the groups that are mobilizing to spread Duncan's message. This "is a message coming from the U.S. Department of Education that, despite all the other pressures and realities that are happening for schools ... arts education is core," says Mary Luehrsen, NAMM's director of public affairs and government relations, who moderated the conference call. [The acronym NAMM originally stood for the National Association of Music Merchants, but the group no longer uses the long form of the name.]

Through the efforts of NAMM and other groups,

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Duncan's message has reached 1.7 million advocates, parents, students and community leaders, Luehrsen adds. The secretary's clarification about arts education funding also provides a "very important money trail that may not have been considered before."

John Abodeely, arts education manager of Americans for the Arts, largely echoes Luehrsen's sentiments, though he is concerned about how great the impact will be.

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*—Jeremy Johannesen, executive director,
New York State Alliance for Arts Education*

"I think this letter is an important reminder of federal funding streams that can be used," he says. "There is a difference between statements and action, but certainly one is more valuable than [neither]."

But Jeremy Johannesen, executive director of the New York State Alliance for Arts Education, is cautious. "I would be surprised if [the letter] had a tremendous impact on funding," he says. "What it reiterates ... is that the Elementary and Secondary Education Act includes the arts as a core subject and that federal funding can be used in support of the arts. Any statement from the Secretary of Education supporting arts education is encouraging, but it will not change the culture of the 'teach to the test' education system."

Arts groups may not have to wait long to see if anything changes. This fall, the Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics will begin a survey to assess arts education in grades K-12. The results, which should take into account at least some of the recent economic fallout, are expected to be released in early 2011.

THE TEXT OF SECRETARY ARNE DUNCAN'S AUGUST 2009 LETTER

Dear School and Education Community Leaders:

At this time when you are making critical and far-reaching budget and program decisions for the upcoming school year, I write to bring to your attention the importance of the arts as a core academic subject and part of a complete education for all students. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) defines the arts as a core subject, and the arts play a significant role in children's development and learning process.

In June, we received the 2008 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in the Arts results for music and visual arts. I was reminded of the important role that arts education plays in providing American students with a well-rounded education. The arts can help students become tenacious, team-oriented problem solvers who are confident and able to think creatively. These qualities can be especially important in improving learning among students from economically disadvantaged circumstances. However, recent NAEP results found that only 57 percent of 8th graders attended schools where music instruction was offered at least three or four times a week, and only 47 percent attended schools where visual arts were offered that often.

Under ESEA, states and local school districts have the flexibility to support the arts. Title I, Part A of ESEA funds arts education to improve the achievement of disadvantaged students. Funds under Title II of ESEA can be used for professional development of arts teachers as well as for strategic partnerships with cultural, arts, and other nonprofit organizations. In addition, the Department's Arts in Education program supports grants for model program development and dissemination and for professional development for arts educators. Moreover, local school districts can use funds under the State Fiscal Stabilization Fund through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act for the arts along with other district expenses.

Because of the importance of the arts in a well-rounded curriculum, the Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) plans to undertake a survey to assess the condition of arts education in grades K-12. This fall, elementary and secondary principals will be asked about their schools' offerings in music, dance, theater, and visual arts. Next spring, NCES will survey elementary classroom teachers as well as music and visual arts specialists at the elementary and secondary levels about their programs and resources. In early 2011, the Department expects to begin reporting findings from this comprehensive profile, the first since the 1999-2000 school year. This data will help practitioners and policymakers make more informed decisions about arts education.

We encourage you to visit the Department's Web site for arts education at <http://www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/oil/programs.html> to learn more about our grant programs and find resources to meet the challenges ahead. Together, we can and should do better for America's students.

Sincerely,
Arne Duncan