

Arts courses crucial to students' success

If you've ever wondered why schools should bother teaching more than just reading and math, ask 11-year-old Aneisha Barnes.

"Without art, school would be kind of boring," Aneisha, a student at Haugan Elementary School in Albany Park, told us last month. Moments later, she and her classmates sprang to life for an elaborate performance of South Indian dance and theater in Haugan's cavernous auditorium.

"It gives us fun and excitement and teaches us the way other people live," Aneisha said gleefully.

Haugan students usually get just one period of fine arts instruction every other week. But for 11 weeks this spring, the nonprofit group Communities in Schools of Chicago hooked Haugan up with an instructor from Natya Dance Theater who, along with Haugan teachers, offered fourth- and fifth-graders an intensive weekly dose of Indian culture, dance and storytelling, culminating in a high-energy performance last month.

"This helps me see kids in a different light," fifth-grade teacher Sandra Sanchez said as her students danced nearby, twirling in Indian saris and decorative masks, transformed into playful monkeys, crocodiles and peacocks. "They can shine here when they might not in the classroom."

Despite that, arts education in Chicago and in public schools across the country is under assault. First, it was the 2002 federal No Child Left Behind Act, which emphasizes reading and math at the expense of all other subjects. Now, it's massive budget deficits, which

threaten to squeeze the life out of so-called school "extras," including fine arts, dance, theater, foreign language and other enrichment.

As Chicago and school districts across Illinois grapple with budget cuts, we urge them to avoid the easy answer — cutting these "extras."

It shouldn't be a hard call. Research tells us what we know intuitively, that quality arts instruction can boost student motivation and achievement in the core academic areas. Training in the arts also helps kids embrace creativity and encourages risk-taking and experimentation.

Clearly, teachers already know this. More than 75 percent of the 170 schools that seek outside support through Communities in Schools of Chicago listed arts enrichment as one of their top requests, along with health services and violence-prevention programs.

Before Natya came to Haugan, many students couldn't locate India on the map, name the rupee as the currency and dismissed Indian food. The night of the first performance, Haugan kids and parents, most of them Latino, feasted on Indian food, with many lining up for seconds. The kids spoke of a deeper appreciation for the Indian neighborhood just north of them, as well as the few Indian kids in their school.

"I loved it because I got to learn about a different culture instead of just reading about it in a book," said Kathy Brigantti, a wise 10-year-old.

We'd never put down reading. It's at the core of every child's education.

But where would all of us be if that's all school ever allowed us to do?

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Kathy Brigantti (left) and Aneisha Barnes applaud a dance theater performance at Haugan Elementary last month.

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