

Arts May Improve Students' Grade

By CARL HARTMAN Associated Press Writer
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WASHINGTON (AP) -- If your teen-agers want to be in the high school band or drama club, let them. It may improve their grades.

High school students who take music lessons and join theater groups do better in math, reading, history, geography and citizenship, according to a study of Education Department data to be published today.

"If young Americans are to succeed and to contribute to what Federal Reserve Chairman Alan Greenspan describes as our 'economy of ideas,' they will need an education that develops imaginative, flexible and tough-minded thinking," Education Secretary Richard Riley said in a message accompanying the study. "The arts powerfully nurture the ability to think in this manner."

The study, which tracked more than 25,000 students for more than 10 years, found that students who reported consistently high levels of involvement with instrumental music scored significantly higher on math tests by the 12th grade.

This observation held true for students regardless of their parents' income, occupations and levels of education, said James S. Catterall, the lead author and an education professor at the University of California, Los Angeles.

While 38.6 percent of higher-income students who were uninvolved in music scored high in math, 48 percent of those highly interested in music received the high marks.

"Kids who are more advantaged tend to be more involved in the arts. Period. They have more opportunities and you'd expect them to do better," Catterall said in an interview.

But the influence of music was far more pronounced among lower-income students.

Among the lower-income students without music involvement, only 15.5 percent achieved high math scores. But of the musically oriented group, more than twice as many excelled in math.

"It's not a matter of economic advantage. It's a matter of something happening with the arts for the kids," Catterall said.

The study also found that as students progress through high school they are less likely to be involved in the arts.

"There's a clear trend," Catterall said. "Kids participation in the arts declines. It may be that high schools offer fewer programs than middle schools or that kids are more concerned with academics or admissions to college."

Fewer than 3 percent of seniors take out-of-school classes in music, art or dance, compared with more than 11 percent of sophomores.

More than half of the "high-involvement" seniors are found in top levels on standardized tests, compared with fewer than 43 percent of the "low-involvement" seniors.

The study also indicated arts study affected students' racial attitudes.

"Students at grade 10 were asked if it was OK to make a racist remark," the authors wrote. "About 40 percent 'no-drama' students felt that making such a remark would be OK, where only about 12 percent of high theater students thought the same."

When the 12th graders involved in plays were compared to their uninvolved counterparts, 20 percent more of those active in drama had excellent reading skills.

Catterall noted that the work supports strong suggestions, but is not definitive.

This study was one of seven included in "[Champions of Change -- The Impact of the Arts on Learning](#)," by Edward B. Fiske, former education editor of The New York Times. The project was sponsored by the GE (General Electric) Fund and the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation. President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities and the Arts Education Partnership, 1999.

For a copy of the report, please contact pcah@neh.gov.

Associated Press Writer David Ho contributed to this story.

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