

# Let's get **rid** of art education in schools

A writer, arts enthusiast, and online ambassador for visual storytelling has a modest proposal for K-12 education: Let's trade "art" for "creativity."

**By Danny Gregory**

Art, they say, is great for kids. Art and music programs help keep them in school, make them more committed, enhance collaboration, strengthen ties to the community and to peers, improve motor and spatial and language skills. At-risk students who take art are significantly more likely to stay in school and ultimately to get college degrees. A study by the College Board showed that students who took four years of art scored 91 points better on the SAT exams (Hawkins, 2012).

Awesome.

Nonetheless, arts education has been gutted in American public schools. After the recession of 2008, 80% of the nation's schools faced budget cuts. In the meantime, No Child Left Behind and the Common Core State Standards pushed educators to prioritize science and math over other subjects. Arts programs were the first victims. And, predictably, lower income and minority students were the most likely to lose their art programs. In Los Angeles County alone, one-third of the arts teachers were let go between 2008 and 2012; for half of the county's K-5 students, art instruction disappeared altogether (EdSource Staff, 2014). As of 2015, only 26.2% of African-American students had access to art classes (Metla, 2015).

As the economy has improved, there has been some discussion about reversing some of these cuts. But that's not enough.

I'm no expert on education, but having spent a lot of time in school art programs over the past couple of years, here's the impression I get: In the lower grades, kids just have fun drawing and painting. They don't really need much encouragement or instruction. In middle school, the majority start to lose their passion for making stuff and instead learn the price of making mistakes. All too often, art class becomes a gut, an opportunity for adolescents to screw around. By high school, they have been divided into a handful who are "artsy" and may



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go on to art school and the vast majority who have no interest in art at all.

In short, every child starts out with a natural interest in art, but for most it is slowly drained away until all that's left is a handful of teens in eyeliner and black clothing whose parents worry they'll never move out of the basement.

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Here’s a modest proposal: Let’s take the “art” out of “art education.”

“Art” is not respected in this country. It’s seen as frivolity, an indulgence, a way to keep kids busy with scissors and paste. “Art” is an elitist luxury that hard-nosed bureaucrats know they can cut with impunity. And so they do, making math and science the priority to fill the ranks of future bean-counters and pencil pushers.

So I propose we get rid of “art” education and replace it with something that is crucial to the future of our world: creativity.

### **A creative core?**

Nowadays, we all need to be creative in ways that we never did, or could, before. Solving problems, using tools, collaborating, expressing our ideas clearly, being entrepreneurial and resourceful — these are the skills that matter in the 21st-century, post-corporate labor market. Instead of being defensive about art, instead of talking about culture and self-expression, we have to focus on the power of creativity and the skills required to develop it. A great artist is also a problem solver, a presenter, an entrepreneur, a fabricator, and more.

Imagine if creativity became a core part of K-12 education . . .

Instead of teaching kids to paint bowls of fruit with tempera, we’d show them how to communicate a concept through a sketch, how to explore the world in a sketchbook, how to generate ideas, how to solve real problems. Theater would be all about collaboration, presentation, and problem solving. Music classes would emphasize creative habit, teamwork, the honing of skills, composition, improvisation.

We’d teach creative process, how to come up with ideas, how to find inspiration, how to steal from the greats. We’d teach kids to work effectively with others to improve and test their ideas. We’d teach them how to realize their ideas, how to get them executed through a supply chain, how to present and market and share them.

We’d also emphasize digital creativity, focusing on cutting edge (and cheap) technology, removing the artificial divide between arts and science, showing how engineering and sculpture are related, how drawing and User Experience (UX) Design are facets of the same sort of skills, how music and math mirror each other. We’d teach kids how to use Photoshop to communicate concepts, to shoot and cut videos, to design presentations, to use social media intelligently, to write clearly because it is key to survival. We’d give kids headed for minimum wage jobs a chance to be entrepreneurial, to create true economic power for themselves, by developing their creativity and seeing opportunity in a whole new way.

Yes, I know that there are high-school video classes and art computer labs, but they need to be turned into engines for creativity and usefulness, not abstract, high falutin’ artsiness based on some 1970s concepts of expression. Don’t make black and white films about leaves reflected in puddles; make a video to promote adoption at the local animal shelter. Don’t do laborious charcoal drawings of pop stars; generate new ideas on paper. Fill 100 sticky notes with 100 doodles of ways to raise consciousness about the environment or income inequality or water conservation. Stop making pinch pots; instead, build a 3-D printer and turn out artificial hands for homeless amputees.

(And, by the way, if we teach kids loads of math and science but don’t encourage their creativity, they aren’t going to grow up to be great engineers and scientists and inventors and discoverers — just drones and dorks.)

Creativity is not a ghetto, not a clique, not something to be exercised alone in a garret. Nor is it a freak show of self-indulgent divas and losers. Rather, creativity is about helping solve the world’s many problems. We need to make sure that the kids of today (who will need to be the creative problem solvers of tomorrow) realize their creative potential and have the tools to use them. That matters far more than football games and standardized test scores. **■**

### **References**

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*This piece originally appeared as a post on Gregory’s blog: <https://dannygregorysblog.com/2016/04/15/lets-get-rid-of-art-education-in-schools>.*