

U.S. students need more exposure to art and music, report shows

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Students received a \$35,000 donation of musical instruments at Ron Russell Middle School on September 17, 2015, in Portland, Oregon. Photo: Jackie Butler/Getty Images for StubHub

WASHINGTON, D.C. — Do you know the notes of the C major scale? Can you name the instruments that play in a jazz song?

Many American students struggled with these tasks in a test of artistic knowledge. Educators are saying it is a sign that students have a lot to learn about appreciating art and music.

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) conducted a test of eighth graders and released its test results this week.

The Nation's Report Card Is Revealing

In 2016, American eighth graders scored an average 147 in music and 149 in visual arts on a scale of 300. Some 8,800 eighth graders from public and private schools across the country took part in the test. It's part of the National Assessment of Educational Progress, often referred to as the Nation's Report Card.

No progress has been made since the same test was given in 2008.

Peggy Carr helps to lead the NCES testing program. "When I saw the results, clearly there is room for improvement," Carr told The Associated Press.

In the test, students were asked to listen to George Gershwin's classic song "Rhapsody in Blue." Only about half of the students were able to identify that the opening solo is played on a clarinet. Students who scored 182 were able to label all the eight musical notes in C major, and students who got 150 were only able to label one note.

In another test, students looked at two paintings of a mother and child. Most could point to one or two structural differences between them. However, when they looked at an artist's self-portrait, the students usually struggled to explain the technical approach and deeper meaning behind it.

"The average student does not know a lot of the content that was asked of them on this assessment," Carr said. "It was a difficult assessment, a challenging assessment."

Some Skills Improved Over Time

On the bright side, the gap in artistic skills has narrowed between white and Hispanic students. It went from a difference of 32 to 23 points in an average score in music and from 26 to 19 points in arts since the previous test. Girls continued to outperform boys.

The gap between black and white students, however, remained unchanged. While white students scored an average of 158, black students got 129 on the music test. The margin of difference was similar to the arts portion of the exam — 158 for white students and 128 for black students.

The Importance Of Arts In Education

"Every student should have access to arts education to develop the creativity and problem-solving skills that lead to higher success both in and out of school," said Ayanna Hudson. She is director of arts education at the National Endowment for the Arts. It is a government program that gives money to encourage excellence in the arts.

"Arts education can be especially valuable for our nation's underserved students, leading to better grades, higher graduation rates and increased college enrollment," she said.

Randi Weingarten is president of the American Federation of Teachers. She said visual arts help to develop a child's creative and critical thinking, and exposure to music can boost students' graduation rates or academic results. She criticized the Trump administration's plan to cut funding for after-school and summer programs, which particularly affected low-income families. She also condemned the president's proposal to eliminate the National Endowment for the Arts.

Diminishing the importance of the arts "is wrong and will prevent our children from growing up as well-educated, well-rounded citizens," Weingarten said in a statement.

The Education Department did not have an immediate comment on the test.