



programs that bridge the gap

Providing schools with extra educational activities

BY JAN WILSON

With schools under pressure to maintain or reduce their budgets, often the first subjects to come under the knife are “non-essential” classes, such as art or music. While knowledge of Rembrandt or musical scales isn’t measured on any standardized tests, educational research has definitively shown that these activities are important for students’ intellectual growth. There are a wealth of local programs that bridge the gap between what the schools would like to provide and what they are able to offer their students and still balance their budgets. As an added benefit, since these programs often operate with minimal overhead and are able to get grants, the classes can be provided to schools and low or no cost.

THE ARTS

A mother and daughter, both former classroom teachers, own KidzArt, Northern New

Jersey, and have seen their art enrichment program take off in 16 schools in Northern New Jersey and Rockland County, N.Y. “We couldn’t help but notice the direction in which art education was going. Many programs were being negatively affected and we felt that not all students were being exposed to the arts to the fullest,” says Nyree Shishmanian, executive director. “We feel that KidzArt fills a niche that is many times overlooked. We offer a fun, safe and challenging environment for students to thrive in.”

Indeed, whether programs are being paid for through PTAs or other sources, or through fees that parents pay themselves for their children to participate in artistic after-school pursuits, they are likely to be part of the educational landscape for years to come.

Even before the recession, music programs were being crowded out of regular school schedules as schools struggled to provide enough hours for children to prepare for standardized tests as well as learn the rest of the required curriculum. While some parents

could afford private music instruction for their children, often the poorest children were left with no outlet to this aspect of their education. Enter Little Kids Rock, founded in the San Francisco Bay Area, which since 2002 has trained music teachers in several school districts in New Jersey as well as New York City.

“We go into districts that have 50 percent or more of their students receiving free lunch,” says Keith Hejna, communications and outreach director for the program. “We make the donation of this program directly to the district ourselves, providing workshops for the teachers and donating the instruments to the schools.” To launch a chapter of the program – which is in more than 25 cities – costs about \$60,000.

Little Kids Rock trains both the musically talented and non-musicians how to teach music and uses its own workshops and materials over the course of a weekend to get teachers competent in managing its guitar-based curriculum. The program also has a



KidzArt, Little Kids Rock and HealthBarn USA are just some of the special program providers.

keyboard curriculum, Hejna says, and bass and drums components are being developed.

Programs can be run during the school day, much like band class, or in the after-school hours. "We don't micromanage," says Hejna. The program provides web-based support for its teachers through a forum where they can ask questions and seek advice amongst fellow practitioners. "Before, music teachers used to feel isolated from peers in other schools, but now they don't."

HEALTHFUL LIFESTYLES

Dovetailing with the national push to increase children's understanding of nutrition, HealthBarn USA provides both assemblies and after-school programs in the area.

"We have reached over 10,000 students during assemblies in Bergen County and across the U.S., including Massachusetts, Pennsylvania and California," says Stacey Antine, founder and CEO of HealthBarn USA.

The 90-minute assembly features USDA MyPlate food sampling and an exercise activity followed by a tasting event from the five food groups for all students. The organization has also partnered with schools in Tenafly and Allendale to prepare special assemblies to introduce new school lunch offerings, as well as create strategic plans for school gardens.

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Echoing the home economics classes of yesteryear, the organization also provides after-school enrichment programs to schools that focus on teaching healthy cooking and being active. It also partners with the Transitions School of Bergen County, a special-needs school, to provide students with life skills, such as cooking and gardening.

ENHANCING LITERACY

It's often been said that a good teacher can bring a lesson to life, but some educators are also able to rely on other artists to reach students in a way that lecturing in a classroom cannot. Kids Express, an organization that provides drama, video and poetry workshops tailored to the language arts curriculum in schools in this area, provides programs for children from pre-K to 12, both during and

after school hours. "These four-to-six-week workshops give children the time and dedicated context to focus on an artistic project that is not grade-based or achievement-based but rather designed to inspire creativity and open expression, offering students an inspiring, positive and pro-active way to approach academic material," says Director Dani Kopoulos.

Examples of the organization's work include organizing student-written monologues that enhance students understanding of the Civil War, creative movement productions to represent the systems of the body in science class and guiding first grade children through writing folk tales based on other world cultures.

As schools seek to do more with less, there's no doubt that these kinds of programs will continue to develop and flourish in response to a need in schools and the growing realization that children need more than just the basics to thrive as learners. As Hejna says, playing the guitar in school is about so much more than just being able to read music. "Children who learn to play a musical instrument are 52 percent more likely to go to college," he says. "When kids learn to play an instrument, it gives them extra drive." ♦

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