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What are the characteristics of rigorous fine arts programs in schools?

A rigorous fine arts program has a lot of students enrolled and high participation rates. It also has a lot of performing opportunities that are well attended for students; but there are some other things that aren't as frequently considered, like multidisciplinary courses, where a student might be learning math along with music, or music along with math. Teachers can collaborate to create courses that are interdisciplinary.

What are the major challenges in creating quality fine arts programs?

Probably the biggest challenge in creating a quality fine arts program is ensuring that administrators understand that the arts deserve as much focus and respect as other courses students are taking. Too often students are pulled from arts courses for test preparation, or teachers are pulled out of arts courses to help with other needs on campus. Teachers have to work with the administrators to ensure that the courses that are taught in their classrooms address all of the student standards to be sure that they're rigorous, and to be sure that the teacher is differentiating so that all students have the opportunity to learn in the classroom. Especially when we're talking about at risk students, this type of engagement is really important for keeping students involved in school. We've seen courses being offered where students have better attendance, where they tend to stay in school instead of dropping out because the arts courses engage them in ways that many other courses can't. Another challenge is incorporating technology. There are opportunities to use tablets or cell phones to create art, to record art for students, and to create electronic portfolios. Of course, that requires that the administrators and the teachers not only stay up-to-date on what the current technology is, but that the schools be able to afford the technology that's required.

What challenges are there in community engagement when supporting the arts?

Another challenge is involving the community and ensuring that local businesses as well as parents and families are involved in student art programs. An example might be a local bank that displays student artwork. Districts that are really good at this tend to have older groups of students performing for younger groups of students, and tend to have celebrations around displays of student artwork. Students should be talking with their parents and their teachers about how important the arts are to them. Students should also be asking their parents to participate, to come to their shows, and to display art work at their businesses.

What role do teachers, parents, and students play in encouraging excellent fine arts programs?

Parents are so important to supporting a good fine arts program! Not only do they volunteer and attend performances, they offer opportunities for students to display artwork at the parents' place of work. It's also really important for parents and students to make it clear to their administrators, both at the district and campus level, that the arts are important to them. The arts deserve as great of focus and concentration as all the other courses. Students should be advocating for the kinds of courses that they want; they should talk with their parents and with their teachers and their administration about the kind of courses that are important to them. That will offer them a high quality arts education.