

In Support of the Arts

- Alex Kerai

On January 23, a unanimous vote by the school committee led to the diminishing of one of the most successful programs at Marblehead High School. The Arts program at the high school has garnered numerous awards for its visual and performing arts; in addition, many distinguished alumni have gone on to study art at the collegiate level. Just last weekend, the Marblehead High School a cappella groups swept all four special awards at N.E. Voices, and Luminescence was one of the top three groups at the competition. Although Principal Layne Millington said that he “sees the changes as a way to increase the choices for students... bound for MIT or pre-med programs who are doubling up on science classes in high school,” what about the students who would not otherwise find the arts? If MHS forces students to take four years of science and four years of math (as was just approved), along with the standards already in place for four years of English and four years of social studies, how will they be able to find the time to take an arts class and discover something that they may love?

One school committee member, among others, said at the meeting that increasing the graduation requirement from three to four years for both math and science brings Marblehead in accord with the state standards. But not all of the state standards. The Massachusetts Arts Curriculum Framework applies to the study of dance, music, theatre and the visual arts, and, according to the Framework, in those arts “people express ideas and emotions that they cannot express in language alone.” Therefore, MHS should not be requiring students to study mainly concrete principles. “The arts are what make us human and are worth being studied in their right,” Ms. Amanda Roeder, the choral teacher and Department Head at Marblehead High School, observed to me. Even Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, in a piece entitled Reinvesting in Arts Education, agreed: “Education in the arts is more important than ever. In the global economy, creativity is essential. Today’s workers need more than just skills and knowledge to be productive and innovative participants in the workforce.” In the arts, students have the power to determine the outcome of anything they are working on – be it a piece of visual or performing art – and those decisions result in a tangible product that prepares students for the decisions they will have to make in the job force that cannot be solved by an equation or proven principle.

As one student noted to me, students should not be forced to take two years of art classes when they would prefer to take an extra science course. But by flipping the requirements, isn’t that exactly what the school committee is doing to the arts students by forcing them to take four years of science classes when they want to take extra art courses? Massachusetts Core Standards do require four years of mathematics and only one year of an arts program, but they also only require three years of lab-based science. The Massachusetts Science and Technology/Engineering Curriculum Framework only specifies five high school introductory courses, all of which were previously taught under the requirements that were in place up until this vote. One of the courses is Technology/Engineering, which was covered under the business/computer/technology requirement at the high school ... which was just removed. So why add an extra year

of science, while cutting the business/technology requirement, when it was possible to meet state requirements with three years of science and one year of business/technology?

Although Principal Millington and Superintendent Maryann Perry said there will not be a reduction in the arts budget or its teachers, Ms. Pascale Queval, an art studio teacher and Department Head, noted that “rising inflation coupled with the same budget each year makes it difficult to operate on a consistent level without cutting teaching positions or classes.” In 1999, Secretary of Education Richard Riley wrote, “If young Americans are to succeed, they will need an education that develops imaginative, flexible and tough-minded thinking. The arts powerfully nurture the ability to think in this manner.” Yet in the last fifteen years, we have not been adding arts programs, as we should be, but instead cutting programs that once flourished. We need to reinvest in arts education and realize the potential of the arts. An arts education teaches students to “problem solve, collaborate, and develop multiple perspectives when looking at a problem, skills that will be helpful to 21st century workers,” Ms. Roeder noted. The arts are an integral part of a student’s academic experience and their funding should not be challenged; rather, legislators should unanimously approve funding because the arts, as written in the Massachusetts Frameworks, allow students “to understand the range and depth of the human imagination.”

© 2011
You may not
distribute without
permission from the
author of this piece and
from the Headlight
newspaper editor.