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**Guest commentary**

**The magic bullet for education reform**

By Mike Merrifield, Manitou Springs

Over the past few years, a huge amount of discussion, debate and hot air has been expended over Colorado's dropout rate, the achievement gap, graduation rate, and education reform in general. I am convinced that many of the so-called "solutions" are really poison pills in disguise, offered by those whose true motives are to destroy public education as we know it. But I have the magic bullet to close the achievement gap, keep kids in school, raise the graduation rate and CSAP scores - all with one stroke! The solution: restore the arts to a place of importance in the core of the curriculum.

The hyper-attention paid to high-stakes testing, and the desperate efforts of schools to continually raise their CSAP scores, have forced many school districts to choose between funding the arts or increasing funding for their math, reading and writing curriculum and test preparation.

This is a tragic mistake. There is an immense and growing body of evidence that points to the important role of arts education in improving student achievement, offering positive alternatives to troubled youth, developing America's creative industries, re-engaging disengaged and bored kids, and building a workforce capable of competing in an increasingly knowledge-based economy. An education rich in the arts and humanities develops skills that are crucial to the productivity and competitiveness of the nation's workforce. It has been Americans' ability to think creatively, communicate effectively and work collaboratively that has thus far kept America on the leading edge of invention, experimentation and innovation.

While virtually every state, including Colorado, has adopted standards in the arts, only a few have incorporated the arts into their accountability systems. Colorado is not one of them. This is in spite of compelling evidence of the positive effects of students' involvement in the arts on their behavior, attitudes and academic performance. Frustratingly, the predominant thinking among the so-called "reformers" is, "If you don't test it, it isn't important."

One of the most important and exciting findings of all the research is that learning in and through the arts can level the playing field for kids from

disadvantaged backgrounds. In a national sample of 25,000 students, those with high levels of arts-learning experiences earned higher grades and scored better on standardized tests than those with little or no involvement in the arts, regardless of socioeconomic status.

Learning through the arts also appears to have significant effects on learning in other subject areas, with students involved in music and theater showing higher levels of success in math and reading. Like I said, the magic bullet.

Lastly, a recent study of at-risk youth and the creative process found that as many as 25 percent of delinquent kids involved with the juvenile court system are gifted and talented. They tested in the top 3 percentile on standardized intelligence tests. These are kids with a learning style that favors the right brain over the left. The traditional classroom situation doesn't work for them - they are bored, they turn off and tune out, and drop out. A perfect example is Albert Einstein. He flunked math, but was also an accomplished musician. This extreme emphasis on testing, testing, testing, and on a narrow, restricted curriculum and a repetitive teaching style doesn't work with these most gifted and talented kids. So they drop out.

In my position as chairman of the House Education Committee, I am working with stakeholders to study methods to restore the arts to the curriculums of schools districts that have reduced or cut their programs, to recognize outstanding arts programs in schools from disadvantaged neighborhoods that have committed to retaining the arts in their schools, to provide grants to schools willing to experiment with integrating the arts into the entire curriculum. And, perhaps it is time to look at the feasibility of establishing some study of the arts as a graduation requirement, like a number of other states have done. I also believe we should be including the arts as part of the yearly school accountability reports.

The arts are not just one of the basic expressions of humanity; in truth, they are the proof of our humanity.

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