

Research, Music and Policy Debates

The word is out researchers have discovered a way to make kids smarter. And savvy parents are signing their children up for private piano lessons while school boards debate the role of music in the public school curriculum.

Statistics indicate that students who participate in music earn higher grades and score better on standardized tests. But no one has been sure what that means: Do the brighter students gravitate toward music, or does music make students brighter? Now there is powerful evidence of a causal link between music instruction and intelligence.

In a study conducted by psychologist Frances Rauscher of the University of Wisconsin at Oshkosh and physicist Gordon Shaw of the University of California at Irvine, preschool children were divided into four groups. One group received private piano keyboard lessons while another received private lessons on the computer. The remaining two groups served as controls, receiving neither piano nor computer instruction. According to a report published in the February 1997 issue of *Neurological Research*, the children who had received piano keyboard instruction scored 34 percent higher than the others on tests designed to measure spatial-temporal reasoning. Because these functions are critical components in the understanding of subjects like mathematics, science and engineering, this body of research has significant implications for public education policy.

Ironically, at a time when education research indicates the need to move in one direction, political pressures dictate another. Recent public concerns about basic skills in reading and mathematics have led some school districts to narrow their curriculum, eliminating ostensibly peripheral subjects like music, in an effort to improve scores on standardized tests.

Wisconsin's School District of Kettle Moraine has chosen a different approach. In a pilot program during the 1996-97 school year, the district partially replicated an earlier Rauscher study, using kindergarten students rather than preschoolers and group piano keyboard instruction rather than private lessons. At the end of the school year, students in classes that had received piano instruction outscored those who received no formal music instruction by an astonishing 46 percent. "As a result of that pilot study," District Superintendent of Schools Sarah Jerome says, "all kindergarten students in the district now receive piano keyboard instruction as part of the regular curriculum, and plans are moving forward to expand the program next year to students in every elementary classroom."

This revolutionary approach transcends the traditional view that piano lessons belong in the exclusive domain of the parents. Instead, it focuses on whether piano keyboard skills ought to be part of a basic education for all students.

Perhaps it is time for school boards everywhere to step back from the battles over funding, test scores, and curriculum, to look at the big picture and then redefine the terms of the debate over education policy. If we mean business about improving student achievement, we must rise above political pressures, above petty power struggles, and pay close attention to what the researchers are telling us because their message about music and learning truly resonates.

Source: "Research, Music and Policy Debates" by Joan Schmidt, Director National School Boards Association.

(NSBA is a national organization with a commitment to local governance of the public schools.)
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