

Programs keep school arts alive

Teachers are few, so the slack gets taken up in other ways

By JENNIFER ANDERSON Issue date: Fri, Mar 3, 2006
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Nine-year-old Summer Rea has a flair for the dramatic.

The fourth-grader at Vernon Elementary School in Northeast Portland wears a colorful extension in her long blond hair, loves her fluffy hot pink scarf and isn't shy when it comes to singing or acting on stage.

"I like the whole acting thing," she says, peering through the holes of her papier-mâché Sky Queen mask. "I want to act, and I want to be an artist."

Rea is one of 12 girls at Vernon who participate in an after-school art and drama club called Higher Stages, a program of the nonprofit Tears of Joy Puppet Theatre.

Higher Stages is offered to both girls and boys at four other schools: Beach Elementary, Ockley Green and Tubman middle schools in North Portland and King Elementary in Northeast Portland.

At a time when the Portland school district is preparing to cut millions from its budget, the fate of arts in the classroom is uncertain. That's because art teachers — as well as librarians and physical education teachers — are often the first to be cut.

Arts often take a back seat

With fewer teachers dedicated to the arts, programs are being integrated into the regular curriculum. But with the need to meet benchmarks in reading, writing and math, arts often fall by the wayside.

"I don't know in this district that a kid in elementary gets art every day," said Judy Rose, the district's point person on K-12 arts instruction this year.

Filling the gap are programs like Higher Stages, which for the past seven years has been funded entirely by grants — primarily the Portland Childrens Investment Fund and the Juan Young Trust, which supports children's programs in Oregon.

District spokeswoman Sarah Carlin Ames said the amount of arts instruction varies widely. Last September, Superintendent Vicki Phillips told a group of local funders that of the Portland school district's 52 elementary schools, 19 had no arts staff. Five had a visual arts teacher, two had drama, two had dance and 31 had music teachers.

Overall, that came to an average of more than 700 elementary kids for every full-time arts teacher. Phillips said the ratio improved slightly in the upper grades, with an average of one full-time arts teacher for every 300 students.

Phillips last fall said the district is engaged in talks with at least 30 community organizations to boost art programs at schools. She places a priority on the arts, making student participation in the arts one of seven points of the district's five-year strategic plan.

"Arts contribute to a student's capacity to form judgments, to the habit of examining one's own work, to considering alternative points of view, to understanding process, to valuing reflection and to the acquisition of math and literacy skills," Phillips said. "They have a clear place in our core curriculum and as part of how we determine that we are making progress."

Still, Ames said, in today's budget reality, "it's difficult to demand that you must dedicate more resources to the arts at the same time that you'll have fewer teachers next year."

Lessons span the gamut

Led by a site coordinator at each school, each Higher Stages group meets twice a week, learning everything from drama and puppetry to African dance and drumming, hip-hop dance, mask making and mural design.

One afternoon this week, Summer and her peers were rehearsing their lines for their March 10 production of the famous Chinese children's story "Monkey King."

But the girl playing the Monkey King character was out sick, and the other girls hadn't quite memorized their lines yet.

"A lot of them don't get help with their scripts at home because they're dealing with lots of other things," says program manager Karin Tobin. "Usually, rehearsals are like 'Oh, my goodness.' But they surprise us. It really brings forth another personality. They talk about it a lot afterward."

Summer is a seasoned pro on the stage: She sings with the kids choir at her church and participated in Higher Stages last year. This year in the role of the Sky Queen, she'll wear a purple crown along with her mask,

embellished with white feathers, turquoise lace to look like hair, glitter and hot-glued sapphire jewels.

“I have to sit in the sky, and the two soldiers come to my palace up in the sky, although I don’t really know how,” she says in a soft-spoken but self-confident voice. “I think it’s by my magic. I thank the Monkey King, and he gives me back the ancient scrolls.”

Tobin cites several studies that have shown theater gives children skills that help them succeed in life and build confidence, such as speaking in front of an audience.

“It gives them confidence in something that they might have thought they weren’t able to do,” she said. “They experience something more than just what’s in their neighborhood.”

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