Bridging the Gap

Do kids need art?

By Lina Mai | May 7, 2018

Jayden Hairston was frustrated. He was 6 years old, and more than anything in the world, he wanted to learn how to sing. But his public elementary school in Yonkers—a community just north of New York City—didn’t offer the music instruction he needed. So he begged his parents to sign him up for after-school lessons.

Jayden’s mom, Nicole Stansbury, wanted to give her son the chance to follow his passion. Ever since she could remember, he had been singing and dancing for family and friends. But private lessons were too expensive. “I didn’t know where to start to put that together for him,” Stansbury told TIME Edge.
Jayden, however, knew exactly what to do. He took out his iPad and began researching after-school performing-arts programs. After a few minutes, he came across the website for Harlem School of the Arts (HSA), in New York City. There, he could take voice and dance lessons. It was a bit far from Yonkers. But he convinced his parents to take him to the open house.

Jayden plays the drums at the Harlem School of the Arts, in New York City, in 2015. He was in first grade when he joined HSA.

That was three years ago. These days, Jayden, now 9, is one of HSA’s most
active students. He takes lessons and rehearses almost every day. Last year, he performed in seven productions, including one at Radio City Music Hall. “He found the perfect place for himself,” Stansbury says. And Jayden agrees. “When I’m at HSA, I don’t want to leave because it’s so great,” he told TIME Edge. “It’s made me more confident. I feel better about myself.”

Funding the Arts

Like Jayden, students in under-resourced communities have limited access to in-school arts instruction. That’s according to a 2012 report by the National Center for Education Statistics. HSA is one of many nonprofits that bridges this opportunity gap by offering affordable arts classes. Such organizations are funded by private donations and state grants. Many also receive funds from the federal government’s National Endowment for the Arts.

But the NEA has long been a controversial subject among lawmakers. Some Republicans believe that funding the arts is not a federal responsibility. President Donald Trump’s 2019 budget proposal calls for reducing funding to the NEA with the goal of eliminating the agency. The Trump administration argues that “private and other public sources” already provide funding for the arts. Whether or not Congress will implement Trump’s recommendations in its 2019 budget remains to be seen.
Aiyana Smash, 18 (second from right), performs during HSA’s Masquerade Fall Benefit Gala on October 23, 2017, at the Plaza Hotel in New York City. Smash joined HSA when she was 8 years old, and she has since studied dance, music, and acting there. “HSA has had a big impact on my life,” she told TIME Edge. That’s because the nonprofit provided not only affordable arts instruction but also a “safe haven” when she was being bullied at school. “Mostly, my friends and my art helped me realize that I did have something special to offer to the world,” she adds.

Arts education advocates argue that cutting the NEA is a bad idea. It could leave many children without access to the arts. That’s because 40% of the agency’s grants go to high-poverty neighborhoods.

Jeff Poulin is a program manager at the nonprofit Americans for the Arts. He believes it’s important to maintain funding for arts education. “When learning in and through the arts, young people develop capacities which allow them to succeed in school, work, and life,” Poulin told TIME Edge.

Research by the Denver-based nonprofit Arts Education Partnership, for one,
supports this view. “[Studies] consistently show that arts education and the integration of the arts into core subjects can have dramatic effects on student success,” assistant director Kate Wolff says.

Jayden (pointing) performs in William Shakespeare’s Macbeth in March at the HSA Theater, located in the Harlem School of the Arts. Last year, he performed in two theater productions and five dance shows.

Beyond Academics

Yet researchers at Harvard University’s Graduate School of Education disagree. They found that arts education does not raise student achievement in academic subjects, such as math and English language arts.

Still, study coauthor Ellen Winner says that arts education is beneficial even if it doesn’t lead to higher test scores. “Schools need to value a broader array of abilities and kinds of understanding and expression,” she told TIME Edge. In addition, Winner argues that arts education offers a path for children who may
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Although arts education continues to be a divisive issue, one thing is certain: Many young people benefit from studying the arts. Take Jayden, for instance. “Where he was when he walked in the door at HSA to where he is now is totally different,” says Stansbury. He has become more articulate. Also, “he’s learned time management, which will help him in life regardless of whether he continues in the arts.”

For Jayden’s part, HSA has motivated him to go after his professional goals. Those include singing, dancing, and acting onstage. “I need HSA,” he says, “to help me to get where I need to go.

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