

## ISTHMUS | The Daily Page

### Madison explores ways to improve arts education

Classroom access for all

by Catherine Capellaro

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For a city its size, Madison has a thriving arts community. And all artists start out as students in the schools. But it doesn't take an Einstein (or a Yo-Yo Ma) to note that a student in the Allied Drive neighborhood doesn't have the same exposure to the arts as a Shorewood kid.

Now, amid a growing consensus that the arts are a critical element of educational success, Madison has become a demonstration city for boosting access to arts education for all students.

In July, the Washington, D.C.-based Kennedy Center designated Madison as the 12th Any Given Child city, following in the footsteps of Austin, Baltimore, Portland (Ore.) and Sacramento. As the first step in a two- to three-year process, the Kennedy Center has already partnered with the Madison Metropolitan School District, the city of Madison and the Overture Center to convene a new Community Arts Team, charged with improving "access and equity" to arts education for all K-8 students in the Madison schools.

"There are certain communities around the United States that realize the arts are as important as the other areas," said Kennedy Center vice president Darrell Ayers at a July press conference in Madison that announced the initiative. "We can ensure that every child in the school system, not just those who can afford it, can have the arts in their classroom."

Ayers said Madison submitted a "wonderful application" for the initiative, adding that the Kennedy Center already had a working relationship with the Overture Center. He also said he was impressed with Madison's new schools superintendent, Jennifer Cheatham, and Mayor Paul Soglin.

"You've got a crackerjack mayor here," Ayers said. "I was just very impressed by the passion he has not only for this community as a whole, but also for the arts."

#### Community Arts Team

The Community Arts Team of 35 Madison residents convened its first meeting in late September. Members include educators, philanthropists, artists, nonprofit leaders and museum professionals, along with representatives from United Way, the Urban League of Greater Madison and arts-driven businesses.

This isn't the first time Madison has assembled a brain trust to examine the state of arts education. In 2008, the school district's Fine Arts Task Force (composed of local artists, educators, students and district officials) released a report warning that, over the last 10, years there had been a "perceptible, quantifiable erosion in educational and financial support for quality arts instruction for all MMSD students, with significant cuts being made to foundation courses." The report cited a "perfect storm" of state revenue caps, reduced school budgets and narrowing curriculum resulting from the onerous testing requirements of No Child Left Behind.

Laurie Fellenz, the school district's fine arts coordinator, spearheaded the application process for Any Given Child. She says that the 2008 report provides a strong backdrop for the new initiative, but that Any Given Child broadens the effort.

"I'm not sure all the resources for our kids in the arts lie solely within the district," says Fellenz. "So we started to ask a different question, which was what do we do collectively as a city for our kids around K-8 arts education?"

Fellenz knows what it's like in the trenches. She taught for 22 years in the district and worked for 19 years as the band director at Cherokee Middle School. She says the schools have made progress since the 2008 report and is hopeful that widening the circle of support for school arts programs will galvanize the community.

Fellenz is eager to see more access across varied neighborhoods, more arts courses in middle schools and more offerings in theater and dance, which are less prevalent than visual art and music.

This will not be a "drive-by consultancy," Ayers pledged at the Madison news conference. Kennedy Center staff will provide consultants for Madison through the entire process. The first step involves conducting a community survey of what resources are in place and what's missing, followed by crafting a detailed plan to tackle Madison's art-access gaps.

### **Cash-strapped arts**

Mark Saltzman, band director at East High School and a member of the Community Arts Team, says he's glad so many people in Madison care about the arts experiences of young people. And he hopes the new initiative will lead to additional resources for the schools.

"Needless to say, we need financial resources," says Saltzman. A lot of the equipment we have keeps kids from having the best experience. With shrinking budgets and allocations, we need everything we can get."

Kimberly Wilson, elementary art instructor at Lapham Elementary, says Any Given Child is "fabulous because it's giving validity to what we do."

Wilson, who taught previously at predominantly low-income schools Frank Allis Elementary and Nuestro Mundo, says she is blown away by the city's racial and economic disparities, even at the early grade levels. "We see kids who are falling asleep because they haven't slept enough, homeless kids who are hungry and are not able to learn.

"They need to be loved," adds Wilson, and the art room is a nonjudgmental space where children "feel like they are somebody because they can express themselves." At the same time, she says, working in classrooms of high-needs students involves a lot of scrambling.

"My nervous system felt completely fried at the end of the day because of what I was trying to do," she says.

Karin Wolf, the city's arts program administrator, says issues like this are exactly what Any Given Child means to address. "We forget that, without the certified art instructors in the school having decent wages and class sizes, the stuff we do on the outside won't matter unless we support that teacher," says Wolf. "With the right support and resources they could do a better job."

More adult support in the classroom would go a long way, Wilson agrees. "The needs are so great and the expectations can be so high of what we're supposed to do in these classrooms."

### **Stars aligned**

Wolf says Fellenz is the perfect person to champion the arts in the district, and she feels like the "stars are aligned" by having Soglin and Cheatham on board.

"I think that having strong arts education in the schools is an indicator of a healthy city. You can look at the health of art education and kind of get a picture of the rest of the city."

And look no further than Madison's booming tech industry for evidence that the arts have value, says Wolf. "Talk to the people who are doing the coolest things at the startups and ask them what instrument they played in high school - because they played one," says Wolf. "These are the problem-solvers of our future."

Cheatham, who says she played violin from third grade through college, also believes the arts are essential for students to thrive. "Arts education is about more than art," she says. "It's about literacy and language. It sparks imagination and creativity. It's a crucial part of a well-rounded education that every child deserves."

At the July press conference, Soglin wryly noted that he and his wife, Sarah, logged countless hours following the artistic pursuits of their three daughters in Madison public schools.

"We spent more time at Franklin, Randall, Velma Hamilton and West High for the kids' involvement in arts and culture than in academics," Soglin said. "I think it emphasizes the importance that the arts had in the development and the successes -- including academic -- of our kids."