

The Next Generation of Creative Problem Solvers

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CREATIVE YOUTH CENTER, GRAND RAPIDS

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Arts education contributes to all that we want for Michigan kids: academic achievement, emotional and social maturity, and equitable opportunity. But with pressure to raise standardized test scores, arts and culture programs are often pushed aside. We'll take a look at who is filling the arts gap and why.

Last April, Kimberly Davis, the principal of Charles Wright Academy in Detroit, smiled with pride at a reception displaying and honoring her students' artwork.

Since the beginning of the school year, students have been honing their talents through [Art Road](#), one of many Michigan programs working to bring arts education back into schools.

"Our students wouldn't have art class if it wasn't for Art Road. They wouldn't have that experience," says Davis. "They need to be exposed to more than English, reading, writing, and math. Art opens their world, and they're relating it to other subjects."

Every Charles Wright kindergartener through fourth-grade student has bi-monthly art class for the entire school year when Art Road brings its instructors and supplies into the school.

"They look forward to art class and don't want to miss that day," said Davis. She has seen attendance improve on Art Road days.

Arts education not only has students showing up, but filling up in many healthy ways. It builds on all that we want for Michigan's future generation: academic excellence, emotional stability, human connectivity, and equal opportunity.

Kids who have access to arts education become creative problem solvers and often experience a boost in self-confidence. They tend to do better in math and language arts. They learn valuable skills through music, visual arts, acting, and creative writing. On the simplest level, these disciplines create well-rounded kids – who have the potential to grow into visionary adults.

“Think of art in the context of creativity and innovation,” says [Rashid Faisal](#), principal at Detroit’s [Henry Ford Academy: School for Creative Studies](#). “Art is the essence of life, and it is found in every sector of life from mathematics and science to literature and the social sciences. From computer technology to health and physical culture, art is everywhere.”

Faisal’s middle and high school academy (grades 6 through 12) uses a concept called [Design Thinking](#), which focuses on collaborative learning and critical thinking. Faisal says that future leaders will need skills like critical thinking, problem solving, creativity, and entrepreneurship. Nourishing creativity in students is important not only for art’s sake, but for addressing community problems and global issues in need of creative, innovative solutions.

“The future will be led by bright and inquisitive people who can ask the right questions, who think outside of the box, who are able to re-imagine, re-frame, and re-think not only existing problems, but problems yet to come.” says Faisal.

Arts education also levels the playing field for low-income children. Children of affluent families are exposed to the arts whether it’s offered in school or not, but that is not the case for most lower-income families.

“Because we are in low-income areas, many of the students have no music classes in their public schools at all,” says [Casey Stratton](#), music program coordinator at the [Boys & Girls Club of Grand Rapids](#). The club’s [Music Makers](#) program teaches at-risk youth guitar, piano, or chorus in weekly classes.

Stratton bases his lessons largely on input and feedback from the students in an effort to respect cultural backgrounds and build a sense of trust and investment.

“Every culture in history has expressed itself and left its legacy through the arts,” says Stratton. “The arts are a way to explore the world around us and our inner emotional world as well.”

Yet with all the positive outcomes for students, arts education has been on the decline for years. Continued pressure to raise standardized test scores while operating within tighter budgets means arts education has taken a hit in public school districts across the state and the nation. If math and reading scores are how schools measure success, why teach painting, music skills, or drama?

But that viewpoint can be detrimental to students and cities. “In a very real way, everything suffers,” says [Amanda Uhle](#), executive director of [826michigan](#), a nonprofit dedicated to engaging children in creative writing. “We raise a generation of students who are not connected to those creative things and don’t see creativity as valuable.”

Thankfully, Uhle and other educators and nonprofit leaders across the state passionately believe in providing arts education and are implementing programs within schools and after school to fill the gap in arts and cultural learning. From classical violin lessons, to poetry workshops, to guitar classes, kids are getting their right brains activated.

In an effort to share multiple visions and viewpoints around arts education, Michigan Nightlight and the [W.K. Kellogg Foundation](#) have partnered to produce two localized videos – in Detroit and Grand Rapids – on Filling the Gap in Arts Education.

In documenting the work being done in Michigan's two largest cities for these videos, we visited a third-grade drama and literacy program, an afterschool writing program, a ninth-grade drawing class, a dress rehearsal for a piano and choral concert, and other programming locales.

While we interviewed the arts educators for our video, you'll see the real story told in the students' faces. Their engagement, joy, concentration, creativity, and pride is not only evident, but beautiful, inspiring, and hopeful.

We're introducing the videos today (please take a look), and for the next four weeks Michigan Nightlight will highlight the programs and people, many of whom are interviewed in the videos, who are filling the gap in arts education.

As this series comes to a close near the end of next month, we invite you to join us Thursday, August 22 at 6:00 p.m. for Creative Cities: The Next Generation, a special dual-city conversation about the state of arts education in Detroit and Grand Rapids. We'll hear from arts educators on both sides of the state who are pushing the needle and filling gap to ensure our city kids are bright, inquisitive and ready to tackle the challenges of the future.

The Grand Rapids speakers series event will take place at the [Creative Youth Center](#) with panelists Casey Stratton, Boys & Girls Club music program coordinator; Lori Slager, Creative Youth Center executive director; [Kim Dabbs](#), WMCAT executive director; and Jo-Ann VanReeuwijk, Calvin College director of art education. The panel will be moderated by nonprofit consultant Christopher Wilson.

The Detroit event will take place at [Henry Ford Academy: Elementary School](#) with panelists Anita Bates, [Henry Ford Academy: School for Creative Studies](#); [Terry Blackhawk](#), [InsideOut Literary Arts Project](#) founder and executive director; Shawntai Brown, InsideOut alumna; Andre Dowell, [Sphinx Organization](#) artistic administrator; Roberta Lucas, [Living Arts](#) early learning director; and Amanda Uhle, 826michigan executive director. Register in advance [here](#).

These Speaker Series events are presented by [Model D](#) (Detroit) and [Rapid Growth](#) (Grand Rapids), in partnership with [Michigan Nightlight](#) and the [Urban Innovation Exchange](#) (UIX). The program is free and open to the public thanks to support from the [W. K. Kellogg Foundation](#), [Knight Foundation](#) and [MSHDA](#), the Michigan State Housing Development Authority. See you there!