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To Wash – Perchance to Dry

Your washing machine and dryer are broken. The snow outside eliminates the possibility of washing your clothes outside and building a clothesline, but you lack the sufficient funds to repair both appliances, so you have to make a decision – quickly. The Covid-19 pandemic was financially detrimental to most industries, both globally and nationally; the educational system in the United States was not exempt from this destruction. To aid with the recovery process, the federal government allocated approximately \$122 billion in total to schools nationwide. As the 2024 school year begins, educators and administrators are faced with a new issue: supply has run out, but demand remains as prevalent as ever. As of September 2024, the flow of federal aid has run dry, “[leaving] schools with less money for tutors, summer school and other supports . . .” (Mervosh and Ngo). By far the most vulnerable program area, however, has been the arts. In California, for example, the 2024-25 fiscal year has suffered a predicted \$26.7 billion deficit; as a result, “The Governor [has] proposed [a] \$10 million cut to the California Arts Council . . . [a reduction to] a base level that has not increased in more than 7 years” (California Humanities). The stationary nature of the California arts budget coupled with its abrupt drop provides insight into the status of the arts in the country as a whole; administrators deem the arts as less significant in comparison to other facets of education. It has been observed that, when all programs face potential danger, the arts will be the first to go. Such a pattern revives a decades

old argument of extremes: should core subjects take precedence over the arts? In reality, the answer is not quite so black and white – the arts and the core classes should be treated as supplements to each other, contributing in tandem to the well-rounded student that schools strive to create.

Neither art nor the core classes afford students any real-world skills without the benefits of one another. Those who argue that the arts are unnecessary believe that their applications to real life are limited, if not nonexistent. People belonging to this school of thought view art classes solely as mediums for expression – that traditional subject matter is more vital to a child’s education than “classes that students take to express creativity” (Chavis). In a world in which the value of a solid education is only increasing, schools would be doing students a disservice by distracting them from what really matters, and in the process, diverting funds from the classes that will actually serve them in the future. On the other hand, proponents for the arts emphasize that the *skills* taught in such classes contribute to an efficient adult. The modern workforce demands “essential 21st-century skills [such as] collaboration, creativity, communication and critical thinking”, which are all reinforced by arts education (Brownell). As opposed to evaluating a class’s value based upon its direct applicability to the real world, arts supporters see the impact that a class can have on a student’s character and work ethic themselves. Without knowledge, however, creativity serves virtually no purpose; without creativity, the applications of knowledge are limited. Viewing this issue as a matter of priorities is flawed because it neglects the fact that a student’s education is optimized by a balance of the arts and traditional subject matter.

Educational structures governed by a standardized curriculum – or a lack thereof – fail to recognize the importance of one another to learning environments. Across the nation, Common

Core standards are becoming increasingly popular amongst local administrative boards. Weighing students, especially in their formative years of education, against other students across the country can provide teachers with readily accessible data regarding their pupils' development. Additionally, "schools that place low on this scoring process are more likely to receive even more budget cuts. By forcing students to focus on their core classes, schools receive more benefits and less problems" (Chavis). These standards do not leave much room for the arts. Supporters of the Common Core and similar standardized curriculums believe that the efficiency outweighs the potential benefits that higher level arts programs do. Additionally, with federal laws in place such as the No Child Left Behind Act, some see the allocation of funds to the arts as a waste of resources that could be invested into bringing up the rear – into accommodating "children that are falling behind" (Chavis). Conversely, those who stand for arts programs disagree with the concept of the standard as a whole. They believe it to be ineffective, diverting money from crucial aspects of children's development on the basis of an antiquated thought process. Educators from schools that have challenged the notion of "the standard" posit that their students gain valuable skills such as creativity and flexibility in the place of memorization and test-preparation, tools that are widely considered irrelevant to the modern day by these communities. They "care about the test, but . . . know that's not all there is to life" (Neufeld). Choosing to defund the arts because core-classes are a better metric for success, many argue, is a point that has long since been proven wrong by the evolution of the professional world, which emphasizes teamwork and innovation now more than ever. Both perspectives lack nuance, though. The workforce is evolving, but baseline aptitude is still as important – if not more – than it has ever been. It is the responsibility of public education to attend to the fact that ". . . kids actually do need a well-balanced education (Neufeld). Schools should work attain a happy

medium, then, instead of focusing time and valuable resources into one subject or the other, only to impair their students' learning.

Neither the arts nor the core-classes should take precedence over one another; they reinforce a student's understanding of each other and contribute to the development of a more well-rounded and prepared adult. At the Ascend Learning charter schools in Brooklyn, New York, paintings are studied in Civics and critical thinking is developed by a strong emphasis on music. Ascend is not especially wealthy – they are housed in some of the poorest neighborhoods in the United States – but they have found a way to sustain quality education across the board using what they have. They acknowledge the importance of the standardized test, but modify the ways in which they prepare their children to foster “positive school climates, give kids a reason to show up to class, and inspire creativity” (Neufeld). Last year, Ascend's standardized performance transcended the low scores characteristic of underprivileged, inner-city areas; they even outperformed city averages in some grades. This system does not neglect students who are behind, either. The use of visual art and music “makes complex literature accessible to struggling readers”, accommodating those who the No Child Left Behind Act was created for (Neufeld). Both traditional learning and the arts have merits that, if eliminated, would severely disadvantage students in the long run, and both have deficits that can be supplemented by each other. Ascend Learning is a snapshot of what is possible for our educational system to achieve if we embrace the power of both together.

So, you still need to repair your laundry appliances. Instead of blowing your entire budget on one of the two machines, however, consider lowering your standards. If you purchase a washer for half of your savings, you leave enough money for a dryer, too. Sure, they may not be the state-of-the-art machinery you would get for all your money, but at least you have a starting

point. If you keep saving, you can work to upgrade your washer and dryer together, making for clothes that are dry *and* clean. Legislators and educators fail to realize the potential that public education holds when the arts and core-subjects work together. For years, the debate has been one of opposing sides — one of priorities — when the real goal should be to achieve a system that teaches students to apply the innovative power of the arts to the knowledge they acquire in their core-subjects, and vice-versa. We would be better suited, as a society, to view classes as vehicles for understanding each other, a perspective that seeks to prepare our future leaders for a demanding and constantly evolving world.

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