



Keeping the Arts Alive



A Connecticut district invests in the arts during challenging budget times

Story by Mark D. Benigni, Robert E. Kosienski Jr., and Brian R. Cyr

When Meriden School Board member Robert Kosienski suggested that it was time to double down on our commitment to the arts, the board room went silent. The district had faced years of no funding increases from the city and the state was launching a new accountability system with a heavy emphasis on English Language Arts and math. Kosienski's board colleagues wondered: Why now? How could we support this? What is the action plan?

Kosienski did not waver. He asked the administration to create a formal job description for a districtwide fine arts coordinator. He knew that the district needed one person responsible for the coordination of the curriculum, launching events, providing leadership, and embracing innovation. His plan was cost-conscious. The district would tap a current teacher, reduce his teaching load, and pay him a modest stipend. The proposal was approved unanimously. For once, it was the arts that hit a home run.

For this plan to work, it was essential that we tap the right person for the job. We needed a teacher leader who taught music or arts, had an appreciation for both, and a firm belief that the arts could help the district meet its academic and climate goals. We looked no further than Maloney High School band director Brian Cyr. He had built a band program of well over 100 students with limited resources and a student body that started playing instruments far too late in their school careers. What made him the perfect choice for this position was his ability to inspire, motivate, and challenge students and staff alike.

The plan

Cyr was inheriting art programs that had not received attention in years. Poor budgets, limited staffing, a lack of content meetings, disorganized equipment, and poor marketing were all hurdles that needed to be overcome. What did he do?

District-wide data teams

Cyr created a districtwide data team for elementary music and visual arts. Too often these teachers work in isolation in their buildings and have very few opportunities to learn from each other. Regular meetings for the arts teachers, as well as the music teachers, were planned and run with his support.

Staff consistency

When reviewing current staffing assignments, Cyr saw an opportunity to redistribute elementary music staff. Traveling instrumental teachers were eliminated, and each teacher was assigned to a single school. This eliminated wasted travel time between schools, increased the teachers' connections to their school, and allowed for greater accountability.

Technology enhancements

Cyr also modernized our arts programs with digital resources. Every elementary school received music software, and the entire district was provided with Charms Office Assistant digital assessment, parent communication, instrument inventory, music cataloguing and fiscal management. The arts department began to focus on digital presentation tools, digital portfolio design, tablet use, and digital gallery presentations.

Continuum of services

Elementary level

All students in kindergarten through fifth grade regularly participate in visual arts programs. Many of the students' creations adorn our schools' hallways and public areas. Additionally, students receive classroom music instruction with a choral and applied skill focus.

Middle school level

One hundred percent of our middle school students take both music and arts. This assures that all students are exposed to both arts and music and are immersed in the core elements of the national core arts standards: Create, Perform, Present, Respond. Special offerings like ceramics, digital animation, guitar, piano, and world percussion give students choice and voice in their learning.

High school level

To expose high school students to as many visual arts and music classes as possible, all visual arts classes and many music classes run as semester courses for half of the school year. Instrumental and choral ensembles are full-year courses and meet daily. These classes have curriculum aligned to the new national core arts standards. Students

appreciate having choice in their learning and the ability to take medium-specific courses.

Marketing for sustainability

With the district's budget picture looking bleaker every day, Cyr knew that if he was going to sustain our progress in the arts, he needed to develop student, parent, and community support. All schools put on holiday concerts and other performances for parents and the community. Arts in the Park, hosted in Meriden's historic Hubbard Park, was created as a free outdoor festival featuring music from all schools along with a district K-12 arts exhibit.

Whether forming partnerships with the Meriden Youth Theatre, a local arts gallery, or the senior center, Cyr recognized these collaborative partnerships would be vital to assuring that the arts survived the budget crisis.

The 'ask'

With things improving quickly and with minimal financial investments required so far, next came the big ask. Cyr knew that he could get hundreds more students involved in music programs if we increased orchestral music programming in grades four through 12. So, he made the following pitch: Add a part-time strings instructor to the high school then have this person teach high school orchestra and coach elementary and secondary instrumental teachers, and increase this teacher to full time the following year as the orchestral director at both high schools.

Once this was in place, we realigned the middle school music staff to ensure that we had a strings specialist at each middle school. With the addition of one teacher, the Meriden Public Schools now boasts a full districtwide strings program.

Here, students succeed

By giving music and arts teachers a greater voice and supporting their work, the Meriden Public Schools has seen positive increases in academic and climate and culture indicators. On our latest Smarter Balanced Assessment State mandated tests, Meriden's English Language Arts growth was 3.9 percent, compared to state growth of 3.3 percent. Math growth was 7.1 percent compared to state growth of 3.6 percent.

STAR assessments showed grades one through eight above the national average for reading and grades two, five, six, and seven above the national average for math. We also saw advanced placement and early college experience enrollments increase by 127 percent since 2010-11 and graduation rates increase by 4.5 percent last year alone.

When looking at climate indicators, our students' gains were equally impressive. Since 2010-11, suspensions are down by 71 percent, expulsions down by

96 percent, and school-based arrests down by 81 percent. We now have 275 fewer chronically absent students.

While the positive signs of progress cannot be directly attributed to our increased focus on the arts, we do know that more students than ever are participating in arts programs and survey results reveal that students enjoy and love the arts.

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