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The Lowe Down: Is Vermont neglecting arts education?

By Jim Lowe



Jeb Wallace-Brodeur / Staff Photo

Erika Lowe is arts education programs manager for the Vermont Arts Council in Montpelier.

Vermont is justly proud of its thriving arts community. The state is packed full of art museums and galleries; music of every kind is all around us, even at the highest levels; and theater abounds, community and topnotch professional.

Vermont is a great place to be if you love the arts — unless you happen to be a kid.

Arts education in Vermont has long taken a back burner to math, science and even sports. And yet, a far greater number of Vermonters find careers in the arts or related to the arts than in professional sports.

What can be done? One person spends her days looking for the way forward — and she believes something can be done.

“What’s ideal for arts education statewide is you want a three-legged stool,” explained Erika Lowe, the Vermont Arts Council’s education programs manager.

“You want to have your arts education person at your state arts agency (Lowe), your arts education specialist at the agency of education, and perhaps an arts education alliance. Many states have that, not all,” she said.

“We are one of only five states that does not have an arts content specialist at the Agency of Education,” Lowe, no relation to the author, said in an interview last week in Montpelier. “That was cut four years ago. Someone left and wasn’t replaced. At that time, the arts education alliance dissolved. So we have a three-legged stool with one leg now.”

And that’s made all the more difficult with the inherent limitations of our time.

“One of the challenges is that there is not just a lack of arts in the schools, but you now have teaching staffs and administrations in the schools who didn’t have that access when they were in school. And it’s twice as hard to convince people to value arts education,” Lowe said.

“That’s why, through our arts grants programs, we’re not just focused on access, but for teachers getting professional development, and our teaching artists working

collaboratively with classroom teachers, and not just coming in and out, with nothing sustainable changing.”

The Vermont Arts Council, founded in 1964 with funds from the National Endowment for the Arts, is the state’s nonprofit arts advocate. Although not a state agency, it received nearly \$1 million of its \$1.9 million 2015 budget from the state, and another \$700, 000 from the NEA. The arts council spent this on direct grants as well as support services.

Lowe, previous to her position at the arts council, taught at Burlington High School for five years, during which she was part of a project funded by the The Partnership for Change.

“It was a multi-million dollar grant helping to transform Burlington and Winooski high schools,” she said. “I was the community-based learning fellow, so my position was really to help teachers partner with community organizations and have students learning with community partners outside the classroom.

“That included all subjects, but arts certainly played a role.”

Lowe claims a total of 13 years of experience as a classroom educator at the elementary, middle and high school level. Prior to teaching, she was exhibits registrar at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. To this experience, add a B.A. in history, a master’s in education and a certificate of art restoration from Centro Lorenzo de Medici in Florence, Italy, and she qualifies to lead the fight for arts education in Vermont.

The situation in Vermont certainly isn’t all bad. Lowe has found pockets of high-quality school arts instruction, but not statewide. A stellar example is the Integrated Arts Academy at H.O. Wheeler in Burlington.

“Six years ago, this was a failing elementary school, with 95 percent reduced lunch rate,” Lowe said. “They had trouble with truancy, low test scores, and the district was going to shut the school down. There was a large outcry in the community.”

As an experiment, that and another underperforming school became “magnet schools,” drawing students with specialized curricula, one of them in the arts.

“In six years, that school is now one of the most attractive schools in that district (families have school choice). There’s a waiting list to get in that school,” Lowe said.

According to research funded by the arts council, she said, “We see that truancy rates are lower at that elementary school than others, and attendance is better, that parent-teacher-student satisfaction is in the 90th percentile.”

According to research from the National Endowment for the Arts and Americans for the Arts, the arts do improve social and feelings of well-being for students and teachers.

"If a student feels safe and comfortable in their environment, they can learn," Lowe said. "So you're now seeing students being open to being able to succeed in math and reading because of that. So I think the arts are really powerful."

Another success Lowe cited is The Village School of North Bennington that, through Act 46, became an independent rather than a public school. It forged an ongoing relationship with Matthew Perry and the Vermont Arts Exchange, a local community arts organization. Now that the school wasn't accountable to the same standards as public schools, it could invest more in the arts.

"So it's really exciting to see people start to question and think about the arts in a new way," Lowe said. "We see pockets of things happening."

Another point of pride is Poetry Out Loud, a project funded by the National Endowment for the Arts and the Poetry Foundation, and administered by the arts council.

"We have a record number of high schools participating, two-thirds of the public and private high schools this year," Lowe said. "And that means we have more students learning poetry recitation than playing football in our state."

These are small successes, but there need to be more. Lowe's personal crusade is for early education.

"Research in Vermont shows that half of our students aren't ready for kindergarten," she said. "They're not ready with their literacy skills, or their social or emotional skills. The arts are helpful with that."

When Lowe came on board, this year's budgets were in place, but that didn't stop her.

"One of the things I have done is to get the council to shift their focus on K-12 and really think about early education as well. What I said was, we can't really fulfill our K-12 mission if we're not investing in early education. Students aren't ready," Lowe said.

"It's a great time also to reach parents," she said. "When parents are more involved in their kids' education, it's not just about helping kids but their families as well — and then bringing that home."

Lowe went to the council's board in October and convinced them to increase the budget for early education. And the council is looking to private foundations for support.

"We found out this morning that we got \$6,000 from one foundation," Lowe said.

Just before Lowe joined the council, the board voted to double the funds for the Artists in Schools program, which brings active professional artists into the schools to work directly with the schools for a short time.

"It was interesting because last year the grant opened in August and we were out of funds by November," Lowe said. "This year, we doubled the funds, opened in August and were still out of funds in November — which just shows what a need there is there."

These successes, however, are limited and fractured. There simply is no comprehensive approach to arts education in Vermont. The arts council has been partnering with the Agency of Education, but she has no counterpart there.

"They've been very positive and receptive in working with the council, and we've made some headway. But we need someone in that building," she said. "It really concerns me that when major decisions are being made that there isn't an arts education specialist, the only discipline not represented. When you think about it, that's just asking for one person to represent five disciplines — someone who knows about art, music, theater, dance and media arts."

One result of the partnership between the arts council and the education department is the push to adopt the National Core Arts Standards to replace outdated current ones.

"That goes to the state board of education this February," Lowe said. "If the arts are not seen as core and essential to education, then, when budgets are tight, and school boards have to make decisions, the first areas to be cut are libraries, foreign languages and the arts.

"Absolutely!" she said. "I've watched it happen the past 11 years I've been a teacher here in Vermont."

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