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Art, music programs struggle to survive

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By:

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Staff Photo by Lesley Onstott Instruments that East Side Elementary students were playing to mimic the sounds of various animals sit on the floor as the students line up behind them at the end of their music class, taught by Sonya Henry. Music and art classes are often the first to be cut, leaving only one, if any, teacher at each school, resulting in dwindling arts programs.

Fiddle-eye-fee says the cat, its voice ringing from a musical triangle. Chimmy-chuck clucks the hen, her voice bonking off a woodblock. Those instruments and others, all played by the hands of third graders from East Side Elementary School,

merge with the voices of the rest of the class as they run through the folk song "I Bought Me a Cat."

But the 50-minute class is all their music education for a week.

"I wish they had it at least twice a week," said music teacher Sonya Henry. "It would allow me to actually have more definite areas to focus on since we cover everything from singing to playing different instruments."

Ms. Henry, the only music teacher at East Side Elementary, sees an average of 150 students on a given day.

Each year, trying to meet the requirements under the federal No Child Left Behind law and dealing with shrinking budgets forces more schools to face the tough decision of cutting back programs -- and many times the cuts slice off fine arts.

Some local middle schools, including East Lake Academy and East Ridge, have cut some of their music and visual arts programs, said Karla Riddle, director of Magnet Schools and Fine Arts with Hamilton County Schools.

"We are looking at funding issues, the number of teachers we can have on staff, then budget constraints," she said. "Even though the arts is part of the No Child Left Behind bill, since we don't test like we do for reading and math, it's not on our base radar screen."

Out of 82 schools in Hamilton County Schools, 75 have general music -- the only program fully funded by the school system -- but only 38 offer instrumental music, 14 have theater classes and six have dance, according to school system records.

Mandates by programs such as No Child Left Behind have led to widespread increases in instruction time for subjects such as math and English Language Arts while cutting social studies and the arts, according to a 2008 study by the Center on Education Policy.

"We are having such a hard time with this No Child Left Behind that all you hear is math and reading, that's where the big focus is," said Ms. Riddle. "A fine arts teacher has to really be dedicated."

Research shows that the arts enhance learning, said Joseph Piro, an associate professor in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at Long Island University, who researched the role of the arts on brain development and plasticity.

"We've been finding that simultaneously delivered programs of music and literacy seem to benefit the learning of both," he said. "The more kids listen and learn how to process music, the more their auditory attention skills improve ... and like anything else in education, the earlier you start kids, the better."

"I think when schools realize the arts are not this detachable add-on but can make real difference in improving the academic success of students, they'll think carefully before they decide to eliminate them in terms of instructional programs," he said.

But sometimes, the money just isn't there. Even when the Hamilton County school system can afford a fine arts teacher in a school, they only get \$100 a year for art or music supplies as part of their budget.

"They are, to me, like almost on an island by themselves because they have to work so hard to raise the money they need for the supplies, instruments and music," Ms. Riddle said.

Ms. Henry said she must be creative to manage the money she receives.

"We try to make some of our own instruments or, if I can find another instrument, I bring it in for (the students) to touch and hear," she said.

Outside help becomes essential to exposing children to the arts when budgets are as tight as they are, Ms. Riddle said.

Private companies such as Unum, city programs such as the City of Chattanooga Department of Education, Arts and Culture, and Allied Arts -- which recently had its budget reduced by 42 percent -- have made half the arts programs at schools possible, Ms. Riddle said.

"If it wasn't for (them), most of our kids wouldn't have any art experience," she said.

The St. Andrews Center, a nonprofit that works closely with the Hispanic community, decided to turn its afterschool program into an arts academy because that's a need most schools weren't able to meet, said Director Mike Feely.

"For a long time we've felt that every child should have a chance to appreciate and try different kinds of art," he said.

The arts program that St. Andrews will offer this school year will provide dance, music and visual arts classes for about 40 children from mainly East Side Elementary and East Lake Academy, he said, but they would like to expand it in the future.

"All of (the kids in the afterschool program) come from places with rich, artistic backgrounds, cultures and traditions, but they don't always have the opportunities here, where they currently live, to go to the museum or be involved in the arts and they don't really have those opportunities in school," he added.