

U.S. students struggle in a national arts and music test

By Associated Press
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WASHINGTON, D.C. — The painter Pablo Picasso once said that "every child is an artist."

New results of a nationwide test show that American teens have trouble appreciating art and music.

Education leaders are saying the test is a sign that students have a lot to learn.

Test Reveals "Room for Improvement"

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) conducted a test of teenagers. It released its 2016 test findings this week. Out of a possible score of 300, American eighth graders scored an average 147 in music and 149 in visual arts.

Some 8,800 eighth graders across the country took part in the test. It is part of the National Assessment of Educational Progress—often called the Nation's Report Card.

No improvement has been made since the same test was given in 2008.

Peggy Carr helps to lead the NCES testing program. "When I saw the results, clearly there is room for improvement," Carr told The Associated Press.

Teens Face Musical Challenges

In the test, students were asked to listen to George Gershwin's famous song "Rhapsody in Blue." Only about half of the students were able to identify that the opening part is played on a clarinet. Students who scored 182 were able to identify all the eight musical notes in the key of C major. Students who got 150 were able to recognize one note.

In another test, students looked at two paintings of a mother and child. Most could point to one or two differences in style between them. However, when students looked at an artist's self-portrait, they usually struggled. They could not explain the artist's methods or the deeper meaning behind the work.

"The average student does not know a lot of the content that was asked of them on this assessment," Carr said. "It was a difficult assessment, a challenging assessment."

Hispanic Students Gain Ground

There was some good news in the results. For a long time, white students had outperformed Hispanic students in the arts. That difference is getting smaller. It went from a difference of 32 to 23 points in an average score in music, and from 26 to 19 points in arts since the previous test. Girls continued to outperform boys on the test.

The gap between black and white students has not changed. On the music test, white students scored an average of 158. Black students got 129. The difference was similar to the arts section of the exam: 158 for white students and 128 for black students.

Arts Educations Equals "Higher Success"

Every student should be able to have an arts education, said Ayanna Hudson. She is director of arts education at the National Endowment for the Arts. It is a government program that gives money to schools and theaters to promote the arts.

Arts education can develop creativity and problem-solving skills, Hudson said. These can "lead to higher success both in and out of school." Knowledge of the arts is especially valuable for students from poor areas, she says. Arts appreciation can lead to "better grades" and more students going to college.

Schools Need the Arts

Randi Weingarten is president of the American Federation of Teachers. She said visual arts such as painting and drawing can help to develop a child's creative and critical thinking. Playing a musical instrument can boost students' test grades, she said.

She criticized President Trump's government. He wants to cut funding for after-school and summer programs. Many of these programs are used by poorer families, and losing them would hurt those people the most, Weingarten said.

The government also wants to cut the entire National Endowment for the Arts.

Weingarten strongly disagrees with the idea. She said the president is attacking the importance of the arts. This "will prevent our children from growing up as well-educated, well-rounded citizens," Weingarten said.

The Department of Education is the part of government that makes rules for schools. It did not have an immediate comment on the test.

Using evidence from the text, make a claim for or against the importance of fine arts education in our schools: