

Art Department Presentation Held At Port Washington School Board Meeting

The board and audience members listened to two presentations on a long Tuesday evening.

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By Vanessa Canner

The Port Washington Board of Education met Tuesday night at Schreiber High School for a three-hour meeting that included — aside from regular business — presentations from the Pupil Personnel Services and the Art Department.

After the first presentation on special education from Mehri Fryzel, Sheri Suzzan, director of creative arts, gave her presentation on the importance of creating, participating and performing in the arts.

Suzzan started her presentation by saying, “We believe in the value of the Arts as the voice of the human spirit; past, present and future...We believe that every child has the right to expect an education rich in knowledge of the arts.”

The New York State Standards for Art Education are composed of four standards; first, creating, performing and participating in the arts; second, knowing and using arts material and resources; third, responding to and analyzing works of art and last, understanding the cultural dimensions and contributions of the arts.

Currently, 34.8 percent of staffing goes to the creative arts, which is comprised of art, band, general music, orchestra and choir.

“Over at Schreiber High School we have seven art teachers and it is important to realize that what is going on at Schreiber is that many of our teachers are teaching classes that overlap with the technology department, so we are sharing staff because they teach our digital photo classes and Web design.”

Concerning arts in the classroom, at the elementary level, Suzzan said 100 percent of the fourth and fifth-grade students participate in chorus. At Weber Middle School, 60 percent of students participate in a performance ensemble during their three years and over at Schreiber High School, another 60 percent of students take classes in the arts.

“We have very large numbers going on and one teacher is servicing a lot of students,” Suzzan said. “One teacher is responsible for lesson groups and teaching 170 students...Lesson groups are designed to engage students and provide the individual growth in musicianship. These groups provide time-to-skill development, so when the entire group gets together to rehearse, that time is spent collaboratively.”

Schreiber High School offers 34 different art classes; the most popular of which are foundations, digital photo, symphonic band and AP photo.

“Although it says 60 percent of Schreiber students take classes in the arts, 100 percent of students do need to take a class in the arts, but currently 60 percent are continuing on in classes in the arts,” Suzzan explained.

In terms of funding, the creative arts total budget is \$300,755, which breaks down into 13 different components, the highest being the 66 percent that goes to the BOCES Art and Education. The BOCES program includes supplemental programs such as Arts Partners, Nassau County Art Museum, Great Neck Arts Center and District Wide Assemblies, among others.

"Five percent of my budget is on musical instruments and this is a real strain every year because a lot of our instruments are very, very old and need to be replaced, so we're spending a lot of money repairing instruments that are just not really worth fixing at this point." Suzzan said. "Last year when I came on board I did investigate leasing instruments, which seems to be a very nice and cost effective way to be able to turn over some of our older instruments."

As for new initiatives in the art department, one in particular is the HEARTS program, "Helping Enrich the Arts," with the help of Damon Gersh, which is a program to support and promote art education in children's lives.

"We are in the process of finding our board members," Suzzan said. "Last week we had our first kick-off meeting and I have to say over 100 community members came out to support the arts."

In winding her presentation before taking comments and questions from the board Suzzan said, "Without music, life would be a mistake," a quote by Nietzsche.

The board was pleased with the presentation, but was concerned about the 60 percent of the budget going to the BOCES program and the fact that the numbers in students taking art classes as they get older drops dramatically.

"That percent comes close to \$200,000 and a lot of these programs you went on to mention, some of them are 20 years old in the district," President Karen Sloan said. "I wonder if any of this money could be better spent could we find less expensive options and can any of it be cut entirely."

Suzzan said she knows economic times are tough and has been looking into that factor to look for, "more cost effective ways to be able to deliver these enriching activities because these are all supplemental to our curriculum...There could perhaps be other ways."

All in all, Trustee Larry Greenstein commended the HEARTS Program and said, "I appreciate the HEARTS and I think it's going to be a great organization and that it's going to help us at least maintain a lot of these programs and it may help us in some of the things that we're currently getting from BOCES."

The full presentation is posted on the district's web site.

Editor's note: This article was updated to include the fact that Suzzan was speaking about "lesson groups" not "lesser groups."

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