

Regional

Music education is a key to student success

With school budgets stretched thin in districts across the country, one of the first parts of the curriculum often cut is fine arts, including music education. While studies by the National Education Association point to overall higher levels of academic achievement in students exposed to the arts, this hasn't kept many school districts from scaling back – or even eliminating – arts education. An advocate for music education in schools is Darryl Coan, professor and chair of the department of music at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville.

"In an educational atmosphere where the federal government takes a much larger role in control of what happens in the local schools, which has not historically been the case, strings come with that, money comes with that, sort of, and so there are a lot of challenges for all arts professionals," Coan said. "Unless a music educator makes it patently obvious that what they do is important to a community, then they partly have themselves to blame if that program is cut." He added that the current generation of music teachers takes their work very seriously.

"They realize in many instances the job is not a sure thing," he said. "I always say there is always a job for a good music teacher, not just any music teacher, but a good one. And I think that students understand that."

A native of Denver, Colo., Coan obtained his bachelor's in music education from Illinois State University and his master's and doctorate, also in music education, from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Although he knew he wanted to be a musician from an early age, he also realized that teaching was going to be his career.

"You generally have a mentor or a teacher who you really admire when you were young," he said. "I thought to myself, 'I could do this and do it pretty well.'"

In addition to his views on music education, I asked Coan what he thinks of the state of music "literacy" in the United States today.

"I think that depends on what your perspective of music literacy is," he said. "If by that you mean classical music, and very sophisticated academic aspects of music, score reading and things like that, I would



Darryl Coan (standing) with an student at SIUE.

say in general it's not that great, nor has it ever been. I've read articles from well over a hundred years ago from national music conferences where they were bemoaning the lack of classical musical knowledge in schools and in communities and such." Coan said that he sees music much more broadly.

"I'm not really an elitist at all musically. I like a lot of different types of music and I think literacy is something you gain with experience in music," he said. "I think right

now we have more musical literacy than we have ever had by that definition."

He points to all the people you see around wearing headphones as an example of music literacy.

"What I know is that when I talk to students they have, nowadays much more than 20 years ago, a very eclectic sense of music," Coan said. "They like to listen to a lot of different things. There are a lot of world influences in their music. Some genres that you and I might say is one genre, within

those they have many subgenres and I find that the students know those very well, and they are very sophisticated in their sense of what is good and what isn't good."

One question that arises these days, one that was unthinkable years ago, is why should anybody learn about music if they are not going to become a musician?

"Music is important in school because it is important in life, the same reason why anything is in the curriculum in school," Coan explained. "Music is a part of every culture

Aldemaro Romero Jr. College Talk

at every level." Coan sees a major social importance in the knowledge of music.

"It is a way to reach people in symbolic ways where words are not sufficient," he said, "and it brings forth a whole range of human experience. It carries history, it carries the arts, and it carries mathematics." In fact music helps to elevate student performance in many areas.

"There is plenty of research that has shown many times replicated that music students do better on standardized testing," said Coan. "All music students do, but especially those who play instruments. And it makes sense. If you know anything about some of the current brain research, it's the difficult tasks that have multiple facets that make the brain connections grow fastest and most robustly."

That research has shown that when you have to deal with the mechanics of the instrument, the mechanics of breathing, the mechanics of your mouth, the sound, and the intellectual aspects of listening and playing music, it leads to stronger student performance. "Try and name something else that involves so much of an individual's intellect and physical capacity as playing music," Coan said. He added that access to all types of music and very good performances of all types of music improves music education. "Any person with Internet access can be exposed to high quality music, something that was much more difficult when music had to be bought at stores.

"It's hard to believe but I think we actually have more sophisticated listeners than we used to have," he added. "Now, they are not always sophisticated in a way that you might like as the teacher, but you can take that and use it. That is the frame of reference from which the student comes and has experience in and that's where we start."

Aldemaro Romero Jr. is the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. His show, "Segue," can be heard every Sunday morning at 9 a.m. on WSIE, 88.7 FM. He can be reached at College_Arts_Sciences@siue.edu.

Photo by Michael Nathe