

Not funding arts programs is too risky

By LISA H. LEARY

Arts students may share a natural inclination toward the creative, but even so, they will encounter various experiences in their chosen disciplines to increase, encourage, and develop their natural abilities to become ever more questioning, imaginative, responsive and creative beings.

It has been said that as children we are all naturally curious, playful and creative. The trick is to remain so even as we age.

Being creative in today's challenging world is distinctly an advantage. Just ask D.H. Pink, the author of "A Whole New Mind: Why Right-Brainers Will Rule the Future."

Pink makes the point that creativity, the ability to play and to imagine can lead to innovation; an incredibly desirable skill in the 21st century, be it in the business world or any other.

Creativity is best learned in the arts because it's in the arts that students are asked to design, play, imagine, make meaning and take risks.

Creativity requires one to be open-minded, generating as many different solutions to a problem as possible. It is often said that in the arts, no one "correct" answer exists, only several possibilities. It is then



Photo by BRIAN TEDDER

Lisa H. Leary, shown here in her studio in the Arts and Industry building in Northampton, is chairperson of the department of fine and performing arts at Northampton High School.

up to us to choose the best possible solution. Isn't that more like real life?

Creativity, however, like anything else, must be practiced. It isn't something only for those who may be naturally gifted. For instance, it is doubtful our golf swing will improve without adequate practice. The same holds true for creativity.

Rarely do we realize that the clothes we wear, the cars we drive, the homes we live in and almost everything else we purchased was designed by someone with a background

in the visual arts.

That's huge.

Just imagine your life with-

out music, film, theater, dance!

Yet, that is what we propose for our children when we choose to cut the arts out of their school day.

The fact of the matter is that because the arts are so intertwined in our daily lives, we take these creative gifts for granted. We don't often understand that behind the polished finished product are years of dedicated, disciplined practice, perseverance, passion and hard work. TV programs such as "Top Chef,"

"Project Runway" or "Dancing with the Stars" illustrate this point well. Many times you will hear artists speak of one individual, a family member or perhaps a teacher, who encouraged them to follow, as comparative mythologist Joseph Campbell would say, their "bliss."

A former art student now at The Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art in New York City, referred to art as essential as "breathing."

Often times, young artists are discouraged from following their passion by well-meaning adults who are concerned that obtaining a job in an arts-related field is unrealistic or risky.

Some of the more conservative professional career choices out there may be just as unrealistic or risky, given the current economic climate.

Just imagine if Bob Dylan had chosen a different, less "risky" career. The entire world would have lost a major voice of a generation.

Twenty-four years as an arts educator has taught me that not everyone sees the arts

Please see Arts, Page S10

Continued from Page S5

as essential. Unfortunately, an important part of an arts educator's commitment to their chosen field requires even in good economic times, the necessary ability to defend the validity and protect the integrity of arts programming in the public schools system from budget cuts, state-mandated Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System testing and additional academic requirements that threaten to squeeze us out.

Required arts education courses for all future teachers, administrator's and school committee members would allow appreciation for all the arts to co-exist, influence, transform and illuminate content areas within school communities that do not currently exist.

Continuing to educate our students to become the future

artists of our world is essential. Ensuring future audience support for the arts will require years of arts appreciation exposure for all.

Lisa H. Leary chairs the department of fine and performing arts at Northampton High School. She is a graduate of the University of Massachusetts master in fine arts program in painting and has a studio in the Arts and Industry building in the Florence section of Northampton. Her students have graduated from a number of schools including The Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art in New York City, the Rhode Island School of Design in Providence and the Chicago Art Institute. Her former students now include graphic, textile and interior designers, art directors, photographers, art educators, fine artists and architects.