

RAISING THE BAR – FOR ALL: Visual and Performing Arts by the numbers

By Superintendent Gary Maestas

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In this space, Plymouth School Superintendent Gary Maestas discusses the various ways Plymouth Public Schools provide all students the tools to excel and flourish.

When it comes to our Visual and Performing Arts program, numbers typically are musical ones. Yet the data regarding our VPA program delivers a sterling rendition as to why the district embraces the arts as a critical component of a Plymouth Public Schools education.

Let's start with 37,371. That's the seating capacity at Fenway Park and close to the number of people who heard the PCIS Chorus perform "The Star Spangled Banner" a few weeks ago – for the second time this school year!

The VPA's accomplishments go beyond any one group. The VPA program offers something for everyone—band, orchestra, choral and a cappella groups, performing arts, visual arts, and more. Of our 7,690 students, 71 percent participate in one or more VPA programs.

Another great number: For the 2017-18 school year, there are more than 100 events or performances on the VPA's calendar with almost 10 percent spanning several evenings. FYI, the school year consists of 180 days.

This did not occur by accident. When I became superintendent in 2008-09, one of our goals was to increase the opportunities in the VPA program and make those available to students as early in the education process as possible.

One reason was that study after study reveals that students involved in the arts do better in school, get better grades and score higher on the SATs. But that's a small part of it. Look at the best school systems across the state. All have quality arts programs that engage the student body, the parents, the faculty and the greater community. That's what we wanted here. The best way to accomplish that was to begin by engaging our youngest students.

Every K-5 student receives one hour of music and art per week. When students reach 4th and 5th grades, they have the opportunity to play an instrument and receive an hour and a half of instruction each week. For students whose families might not be able to afford the instrument rental fees, we developed a loaner library so any student who wants to try an instrument can. Free lessons are also included for students in 4th and 5th grades.

This access to instruments led to remarkable growth in the program. In the 2011 school year, 262 4th- and 5th-graders played instruments. By 2013, the first year we offered free lessons to band members, that number rose to 388. After hiring a strings specialist in 2015, the program escalated to 518 students. In 2017, now several years into the program, we are holding steady with 511 students – almost half of all 4th- and 5th-graders enrolled.

Additionally, students in those age groups also have opportunities to participate in chorus, plays and art exhibits. Each elementary school hosts an end-of-the-year art show. Artwork by K-12 students decorates the walls at Central Office all year with an average of 180 students being recognized by School Committee each semester, and during March, otherwise known as Youth Arts Month, about 500 selected pieces can be viewed at the Plymouth Center for the Arts.

The cumulative effect of our students growing up in a vibrant arts program led by talented and dedicated educators is what we see now in Plymouth. It's something that cannot be defined by data, even numbers as impressive as what you have read here. It must be experienced.

What you see and hear is truly amazing. High school students painted a mural at the skate park and have begun efforts in coordination with the town planner for murals at Town Brook – look for it in June. A Banner Project is currently underway with our schools and 12 schools from Plymouth, U.K. (in partnership with England's own Plymouth College of Art) about identity – who we are as a community, school, town, state, nation – on banners that will be part of parades on both sides of the pond in 2019-20. These special visual arts projects complement numerous photography and art exhibits the schools host during the year.

When it comes to performing arts, where do we start? Five a cappella groups, led by our trailblazers – Northern Lights. Marching bands at town parades and other events. Sell-out performances of such theater productions as “Les Misérables,” “Annie Jr.,” and an evening of one-act plays directed by students. New friendships and alliances created through the arts between Plymouth, Massachusetts, and Plymouth, England.

I could go on and on about the amazing performances by our students and phenomenal VPA faculty. We could also add numbers and note how performances have been self-funded through admission, advertising and other fundraising to make them seem even more remarkable. Yet what makes our program most remarkable of all is what it has accomplished in the community.

Attend any one of these events or performances. You will see parents, siblings and other relatives of performers and stage crew. You will see teachers and other faculty members as well as students. What's most impressive of all, you will see Plymouth residents who have no reason to be there other than loving a good musical, vocal or stage performance, or appreciating the expertise and skill it takes to paint, sculpt, or capture an image that moves the human spirit.

These wonderful shows, exhibits and activities are possible because of a comprehensive arts program – music, song, art, drama – that's part of our students' curriculum from the day they set foot in any one of the Plymouth Public Schools.

View our VPA program, events calendar, video gallery and more at <https://www.plymouth.k12.ma.us/>.

Gary E. Maestas, Ed.D., is superintendent of Plymouth Public Schools. He can be reached at 508-224-5035 and gmaestas@plymouth.k12.ma.us. It is the stated goal of the Plymouth Public Schools District to encourage children to realize their full social, emotional, physical, and intellectual potential. In this space Superintendent Maestas discusses the various ways Plymouth Public Schools provide all students the tools to excel and flourish.