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ART: on the chopping block

Many classes and 84 arts teachers may get the ax in Lee County

BY EVAN WILLIAMS
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CATHY LOGAN, AN ART TEACHER AT CAPE Elementary school, said her classes teach children “a level of abstraction and open-mindedness that they’ll be able to use for the rest of their lives.”

And it’s something they come to school looking forward to.

“They are so excited when they come in for art,” she said. “The first thing I have to do is calm them down. They are so excited to have that opportunity to be creative.”

But those opportunities to produce paintings and prints, bake pottery, read music, sing and solve creative dilemmas, could disappear. Kindergarten through 5th grade students here may return next fall to find their art and music classes canceled and their teachers — 84 of them — gone. It’s the only part of the school district’s curriculum which ended up on the chopping block when large budget shortfalls were predicted.

Reading, writing, math, science, social studies and foreign language classes are safe because they’re funded with state dollars. Physical education is

“Art and music are not something we’re given money for. We have to pay for that above (state funding).” — Dr. James Browder, Lee school superintendent



SEE SCHOOLS, A8 ►

Children’s Home Society gives ‘at-risk’ families a leg up

April is National Child Abuse Prevention Month

BY STEPHANIE WESTENDORF
Special to Florida Weekly

Two-year old Adam smiled, his curly brown hair bouncing as he laughed. He alternated between toy planes and markers, playing on the living room floor.

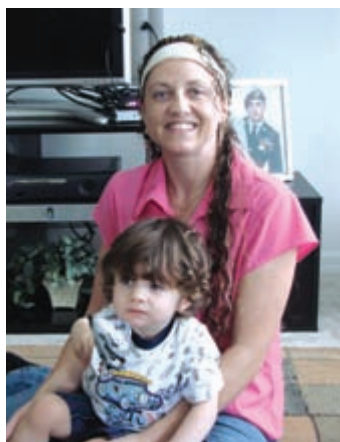
Before Adam’s mother became pregnant at 37, she lived “in a different world.”

“My lifestyle was definitely darker before,” said Faith Percuoco, who was involved in an emotionally abusive relationship.

Three months pregnant, Ms. Percuoco struggled to quit smoking, felt lonely, and suffered from depression and anxiety.

Literally, faith seemed lost.

But then she met her first Family Support Worker through the Children’s Home Society, a statewide nonprofit organization that helps vulnerable



COURTESY PHOTO

Faith Percuoco and her son Adam in their Southwest Florida home.

SEE PREVENTION, A12 ►

INSIDE



Falling in love

“The Last Romance,” opening at Florida Rep on April 24, proves you’re never too old for love. C1 ►



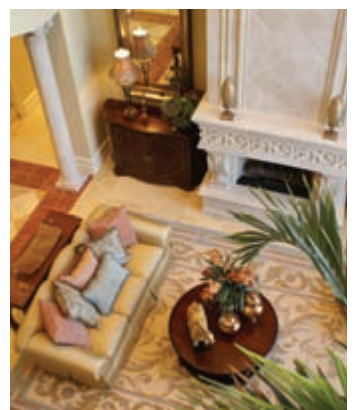
Incandescent Evening

And other society events in Lee County. C27, 28, 30 & 31 ►



Fashion biz

How independent boutiques beat a beastly recession. B1 ►



A view of Vizcaya

Grand estate by Gulfshore Homes fits in beautifully at Miramar Lakes. D1 ►

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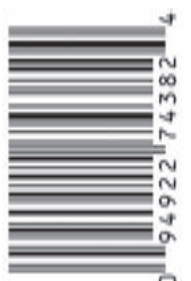
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POINT CLICK

FIRST ALERT
DOPPLER
ZOOM



SCHOOLS

From page 1

required by law and not funded. But art, says Lee County School District Superintendent James Browder, isn't considered a core subject by state lawmakers — in spite of years of scholarly and statistical testimony that art teaches crucial skills which, like reading, benefit from an early start.

"Art and music are not something we're given money for," Dr. Browder said. "We have to pay for that above (state funding).

"I'm indignant that I have to do this to children. I'm absolutely not in favor of cutting it. It's the wrong thing to do. However, when you have the potential of \$50 to \$70 million in reductions, you have to go to those areas where you are above the formula. Is it the best situation? No. But it's something that we can manage."

Although the district is prepared to cut as many as 500 jobs, in areas such as office staff, custodians and transportation, the arts was the only part of the curriculum to be considered for a drastic cut, prompting questions about how seriously leaders take those courses.

"Our superintendent always says he supports the arts and what is one of the first things that's being cut?" asks Paul David Adamick, 61, an art teacher at Caloosa Elementary in Cape Coral.

If the arts were taken as seriously as they should be, suggests Marshall Bower, executive director of The Foundation for Lee County Public Schools, schools would include an art and music section on the yearly FCAT test. The results of FCAT tests are used to grade the performance of elementary schools. However, Dr. Browder says it plays no part in the decision to cut the arts above all other programs.

In a recent budget scenario, the district would have to cut its 2009-10 budget by \$51 million. Losing the elementary art programs in their entirety would save \$4.8 million, a fraction of the projected shortfall and the school district's overall annual budget of more than \$1.5 billion.

"It certainly is getting a lot of press, because as you understand and I do, arts are a very critical component of a well-balanced quality education program," said Jane Kuckel, chairman of the Lee County School Board. "But it's a very small percentage of the proposed cuts, if indeed the worst-case scenario happens."

Because it's such a small percentage, some say that fraction could easily be made up.

"We have more administrators per teacher than anywhere in the state of Florida," noted Robert Chilmnick, the only one of five school board members who says cutting the arts in elementary schools is unnecessary even with budget shortfalls. He'll need the support of at least two of his peers and the superintendent to save the programs if it comes to a vote.

Dr. Browder won't consider help from private arts groups or citizens.

"I support any initiative to maintain the arts, but I'm not going to go the public and ask them to fund it," he said. "That's a slap in their face. I'm not going to embarrass myself or this community by asking (the community) to fund something that is the responsibility of the state."

Meanwhile, other counties seem to be squabbling over a surplus of fine arts resources. The entire elementary school arts program in Lee County is worth about one-tenth of a new performing arts high school that is in the works in Collier County next year. The school district there is competing with a private group to build the new \$56-million facility.



Music teacher Sandra Lantz teaches a drum group at Edison Park Elementary, one of four magnet elementary schools in Lee County which are exempt from cuts to music and art programs next year. The district's other 42 elementary schools' music and art teachers are on the chopping block.

Arts and business leaders react

The possible arts cuts alarmed artists countywide, creating a domino effect of protests.

Jen Riley, a high school art teacher and president of the Lee Art Educators Association, led a petition drive asking state legislators to properly fund education. Alan Jarrett, Cooper Hotels regional director, got involved for other reasons. He runs four Lee County hotels including Crowne Plaza and Homewood Suites at the Bell Tower Shops.

"Mine is a business interest," he said. "We've got 240 employees in the county so we've got a lot of them raising families in our school district.

"We're not a destination location. Our business model is a thriving business community. We need Lee County to grow, we need more coming in.

"We've got four hotels down on Ben Hill Griffin (Parkway), so we've got \$100 million dollars of long-term investments in this county. If school districts and school systems are not well rounded it could make other businesses looking to move to Lee County choose another city."

Mr. Jarrett agreed to help Jeff Hanjain, 59 — a Cape Coral resident and traveling salesman, with no children in the district, who was alarmed by the news of banishing the arts programs. Mr. Hanjain knew where to find help. He had done it before to save an arts program in Georgia with his acquaintance John Benham, an expert at saving besieged school art programs.

Mr. Benham, who lives in Minnesota, met via an internet connection with about 50 local teachers and a couple of school board members at one of Mr. Jarrett's hotels last week to talk about his plan.

"This is an absolute outrage to even consider a move like this in the classroom," Mr. Benham told the group. He also stressed that he would not come as an adversary of the school district, but simply to present how they could save money by keeping their teachers.

The bill for Mr. Benham's services is about \$8,000. He is scheduled to arrive in town on April 27 and spend a week surveying art teachers and learning about Lee County's situation.

"I've been doing this for 29 years, in 47 states and almost 400 school districts,"

Mr. Benham said.

Alliance for the Arts, a local nonprofit, also expressed alarm that kindergarten through fifth grade students

may return next fall to find their art and music classes cancelled.

"Students need their daily serving of the arts," said Lydia Black, the Alliance's executive director.

Tommy Danzi, a student at Edison Park Elementary, said, "I think (cutting arts in elementary schools) is a really, really, really bad idea. It could affect your future."

Ava Roeder, a visual arts teacher at Cypress Lake Center for the Arts high school, agreed.

"The kids that it hurts the most are students who aren't exposed to it in their own home. When they are exposed to it at school they find an area that they were interested in that they would never know about."

Joshua Myers, a local psychologist, painter and photographer who supports the efforts of Mr. Benham and others noted, "For some children arts and music are some of the few classes that drive them to remain in school."

Are state lawmakers to blame?

Some are reluctant to join a contentious debate in which blame is being lauded on state lawmakers, because they don't fund art and music as core programs; and on the district, for being quick to cut out elementary school arts and music.

Edison State College Humanities Professor Wendy Chase was told she could speak to a reporter only on the condition that they meet off campus, so as not to give the impression that her views on cuts to elementary school art programs were shared by the school.

Nothing less than children's creativity is at stake, Professor Chase says.

"The arts are perceived as a luxury, as icing on the cake," she said, "but it's not. We have to change that perception. The high-water mark of any civilization is when it starts creating. Lee County was home to two of the most creative minds to grace the planet in the last 100 years (Thomas Edison and Robert Rauschenberg). If any little body of citizens should be aware of the importance of far-reaching creativity, it's us."

Superintendent Browder and many others, such as art teacher Mr. Adamick, point blame at state legislators who they say underfund education. While almost everyone says art in schools is important, a reluctance to fund it tells a different story.

Florida schools receive less money

per student than 46 out of 50 states. In addition, those dollars are allocated based on the number of teachers needed per student — and art and music instructors aren't considered.

"I do not count as a regular teacher in my building," said Mr. Adamick. "Art and music, P.E., media and guidance (counselors) are not part of that configuration. If we were given (allocations) for that, the state would have to direct money to us and we wouldn't have to worry about cuts to art and music."

Physical education won't be cut because laws require it in elementary schools here, even though the state doesn't fund it. Like art, it's paid for by revenue from property taxes, an unstable source for which there is no extra set aside for art and music programs.

Dr. Browder says state lawmakers who profess the importance of art education are bluffing.

"If (the art and music programs) are valuable, why aren't they in the core?" he asked. "If they're not valuable, then the state needs to say it out loud. The state by default is obviously saying that. They put physical education in the same list of things that are not in the core, but then by law they require 30 minutes of it in elementary schools.

There's nothing in the law that says I have to do anything with art and music. Somebody needs to stand up and say, either fund education properly, or say the only thing you've got to teach is reading, writing, science and math, social studies and foreign language. We either do it right or stop playing the game."

An uncertain future

The district will consider asking elementary school teachers who are certified in all subjects, but don't normally teach art and music, to fill in if there are cuts. Teachers are concerned that's a bad idea for students.

"I'm a professional artist," says K-5 art teacher Mr. Adamick. "I share that with my kids. I tell them to go to the galleries I'm in and they do. I talk to them about art careers.

"When I'm able to talk about Matisse and Picasso and Andy Warhol, I come from this knowledge that I was trained in and exposed to. And because I love to read about artists I have this within me that I share all the time with kids. How can a regular classroom teacher that spreads themselves out with language, writing, math and social studies have time to be prepared?"

The school district is waiting for the state legislature to finish balancing the budget by a May 1 deadline to know if education dollars will be cut. Meanwhile, news from Tallahassee has been promising. Both the House and Senate budgets will increase per student spending by small amounts, not cut it.

Rep. Trudi Williams, Rep. Nick Thompson and Rep. Gary Aubuchon did not return telephone calls from Florida Weekly seeking comment.

Sen. Dave Aronberg didn't commit to funding arts as a core program but said, "I believe in a well-rounded education and that includes the arts. I think that's part of making the student a well-rounded individual."

The school district still may face a shortfall based on falling property tax revenues, which helped arts programs grow during boom years. And under that current system, with arts funded by these shifting dollars and not considered core programs by the state, Dr. Browder says the programs still aren't safeguarded for next year, let alone in the future.

"Put them in the core," he said, "then (state lawmakers) have to fund them. Until the state of Florida gets it, you and I are going to be having these same kinds of conversations." ■