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COMMENTARY

Arts Education and Dropping Out of High School

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Despite declining in recent decades, dropping out of high school continues to be a vexing problem in public education because the personal and societal costs associated with leaving high school without a diploma are high and disproportionately borne by low-income and minority students. This is of particular concern in states such as California, where declining dropout rates have recently stagnated. Evidence indicates that the most promising dropout prevention programs target ways to increase student engagement. Using state administrative education data from Texas public high schools in this study, we investigate whether in-school arts participation can reduce dropout. Courses in visual arts, music, theatre, and dance are active learning experiences that promote expression and creativity. Arts participation can increase sense of agency because students create out of their own life experiences. If arts courses can engage at-risk students in ways other core courses cannot, encouraging high school arts participation could be a useful tool in reducing high school dropout.

In the study, we follow a cohort of first-time 9th graders beginning in 2006 for 5 years using survival analysis. We find that students who participate in high school arts courses face a lower risk of dropping out compared to similar students who do not participate. As with any study using non-experimental data, we must be careful in ascribing causality. The students in our cohort who choose to take courses in the arts tend to be higher income, white students attending high schools with small proportions of low-income students. While the data allow us to control for a rich set of student and school characteristics that influence both arts participation and dropout behavior, it is likely that characteristics we do not observe in the data partly explain a student's decision to take a course in the arts. In the absence of random assignment, we cannot know if an arts student would have graduated high school anyway, even if she had not chosen to enroll in an arts course.

Caveat aside, our findings represent a significant step forward in the field of arts education research precisely because we do not find a zero effect. For example, recent research by Kenneth Elpus shows that any positive effect of music participation on SAT scores evaporates once he controls for the typical student characteristics available in administrative data. While the risk of dropping out shrinks considerably once we control for the student and school characteristics available in the Texas public schools data, it does not disappear. There is reason to believe a causal mechanism is at play. Future research should include experimental designs that can isolate the causal impact of in-school arts participation on persistence and other education outcomes we care about.

Given what we currently know, we fall short of recommending investment in arts education as a specific strategy schools undertake to combat dropout. However, we caution against hasty cuts to school arts budgets in times of fiscal stress until we more fully understand whether and how strong arts curricula engage students and provide reasons for those most at-risk to stay in school. California severely cut funds to its K–12 arts curriculum during the latest recession. Although efforts are currently underway to restore arts programs in California public schools, reversing the trend will be difficult, especially because the arts

continue to compete for funds typically funneled toward math and reading in order to meet accountability requirements.

Rigorous evidence about the value of the arts for public school students is nevertheless mounting—including findings generated by randomized control trials such as the Crystal Bridges study by Jay Greene and his co-authors at the University of Arkansas. Policymakers and administrators should consider this evidence when deciding where the arts belong in our public school curriculum.

The full study can be found in M. Kathleen Thomas, Priyanka Singh, Kristin Klopfenstein, "Arts education and the high school dropout problem," Journal of Cultural Economics, forthcoming.

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