



# Santa Barbara County Education Office

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## Bill Cirone op ed column

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### **The value of an arts education**

*By Bill Cirone, Santa Barbara County Superintendent of Schools*

We all know that when school budgets get tight, art and music education are early casualties. Traditionally, schools and classrooms are rated according to how students perform on standardized tests. You can scan those tests until you grow very weary, but you will never see mention of a treble clef or a two-point perspective.

Fortunately, our school and community leaders understand that the arts are essential elements of a complete education, and they often provide the very skills and motivation required for school success. The Children's Creative Project (CCP) plays such a vital role in arts education in our community. The CCP is a non-profit organization under the umbrella of the County Education Office that partners with local school districts to bring high quality visual and performing arts instruction to our schoolchildren.

Earlier this school year — thanks to the fundraising of the annual *I Madonnari* festival and dynamic partnership of the CCP and UCSB's Arts and Lecture series — Grammy and Pulitzer Prize-winning trumpeter, composer, and music educator Wynton Marsalis reminded over 1,400 Santa Barbara County schoolchildren at the Granada Theater of the joy, wonder, and power of the arts. The Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra with Wynton Marsalis delighted students with the music and stories of jazz legend Duke Ellington.

Jazz at Lincoln Center's concerts are designed to spark curiosity and imagination through vivid conversation and lively performances that inspire audiences to dance in their seats. Through interactive performances and lessons, Marsalis led the young audience gathered at the Granada on Duke's journey from Washington, D.C. to New York City, while familiarizing students with jazz terms like riffs, breaks, and "shout chorus" in Ellington standards "Harlem Airshaft," "Sea Jam Blues," "It Don't Mean a Thing," and other hits.

As Marsalis and his band demonstrated, the arts represent a form of thinking that is both sensory and intellectual, one that is based on human imagination and judgment. The arts are a form of expression and communication that is essential to the human experience, and truly deserve a regular place in our classrooms.

What's more, the arts provide unique ways of reaching students who may not access knowledge as readily through language and mathematics alone. One of the students tentatively asked a band member during the question and answer session following the performance, "Have you ever made a mistake?" The band member smiled at the innocence of the question before replying, "Absolutely. There's so much you learn from mistakes. Maybe more than your successes. You become a better listener, a better band mate, and you recommit to improving. Mistakes can lead to opportunities, if you allow yourself to learn from them."

Many young people find great joy in artistic expression. For some, it is an outlet and a source of inspiration. It helps them keep connected to their teachers and their schools. The benefits of arts education can translate into real advantages, including closing the achievement gaps between groups of students, keeping young people in school who otherwise might drop out, and preparing students for the demands of college and an ever-changing workforce.

Arts education is an essential and integral part of basic education for all students, K-12, providing balanced learning and developing the full potential of their minds. Without the arts, we will have drained from our schools the humanity, the creativity, the discipline, and the joy that arts can provide to all our children.

The words of Plato capture the spirit of Wynton Marsalis' work with our children: "Music is a more potent instrument than any other for education, because rhythm and harmony find their way into the inward places of the soul."

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