**News Page Design**

**This is the story that goes with the News Page Design Contest**

Betty Draper has gotten used to the screams and squeals that greet her every day.

Draper holds a near-celebrity status at Ad Astra for a simple reason: She's the music teacher.

"They're always so excited," Draper said after a recent school day. "The students love their art classes. Because they get joy from them."

Despite her popularity with students, Draper — like other music teachers across the city, state and country — fears her job may not exist next year. Amid budget cuts and an all-consuming focus on raising math and reading test scores, the arts have increasingly been pushed to the side despite their demonstrated academic and social benefits.

In Kansas, where a tradition of delegating decisions to individual schools and school districts holds sway, students' access to the musical arts varies widely — and often depends on parent fundraising.

"If your school has money or if you have a principal who's a real proponent of the arts, then you get it," Draper said. "And if you're not in one of those two groups, then you don't."

More than 20 percent of the state's public high schools fall into the latter category, according to an internal school-district survey released by the Kansas State Department of Education. About half of middle- and high-school students are enrolled in a music class, according to the survey.

In general, white students in wealthy areas are more likely to have access.

Aspera Public Schools officials recently received a $1 million grant from The Wallace Foundation to confront that reality.

The money comes with a January 2013 deadline for the district to develop a district-wide arts curriculum — essentially, minimum requirements for visual arts, music, dance and theater — as well as strategies to enlist support from principals and community partners.

But the effort, the latest in a string of attempts to improve the district's arts program, faces challenges — including uncertainty about where to get funding to implement any plan.

"I appreciate that they're doing it, I appreciate that they're getting input, but oh my goodness," said Peggy Olson, a parent who attended a meeting soliciting community input on the plan last week. "We have so far to go."

The process comes as local arts advocates say the widely debated focus on measurable outcomes in public education is starting to endanger after-school programs.

The list of organizations qualified to receive funding through Aspera’s $23.2 million Families and Education Levy, released earlier this month, did not include any arts groups — mostly because the nine that applied don't closely track their statistical effect on academic achievement.

Mayor Joan Holloway has promised to maintain funding to the organization most affected by the move, Music and Arts Corps (MAC), but the group's executive director called the city's focus on stats demoralizing.

"It felt like a real step backwards," said Megan Whitford.

When Roger Sterling moved to Aspera as a fifth-grader, he suffered from a debilitating lack of self-esteem. It was so bad, he said, that he "probably wouldn't have even had the confidence to pick up the phone."

Seven years later, Sterling is an 18-year-old senior at Ad Astra with a 3.6 GPA and an interest in medicine. He credits his success to a break-dancing class that helped his confidence. Soon, he was playing guitar in a school band, and then in a neigborhood group.

“If it weren’t for my performing arts classes her at Ad Astra, I don’t know if I’d still be in school,” Sterling said. “Art has allowed me to continue my academic career.”

Madonna Gaga has lived in Aspera her whole life, but as the child of a single mother who works two jobs just to the keep the family in its mobile home, Madonna never dreamed she’d be on the verge of a career in the performing arts.

But when Gaga arrived at Ad Astra her freshman year, she enrolled in a band class with Draper and quickly showed why she now can dream.

“I was ready to quit school and go to work to make sure my mom didn’t have to work so hard,” said Gaga, now a junior. “But my guidance counselor put me in this class, and the rest, as they say, is history.”

Gaga’s second piano caught the attention of the teacher, and Gaga entered a state competition, where she earned first place. Since then, she’s been able to parley her work into a spot singing regularly at the Aspera Coffee Shop downtown. She wants to major in music at the University of Kansas.

Sterling’s and Gaga’s stories are not unique.

Research shows arts education can help foster many skills, from self-expression to problem-solving, said Leslie Gore, an educational-psychology professor at the University of Kansas.

Gore said social and emotional learning is critical to child development, but it is being minimized because it is hard to measure.

In addition, many education advocates argue that math and reading should be the focus of school, especially in low-income areas, because they are basic skills required for adult life.

State Sen. Burt Cooper, R-Aspera, Earhart County, said music should not be considered a part of basic education, though he does not doubt its potential power.

Few people do.

So if it's so popular, why is music education so limited and uneven in Kansas, and why does Aspera have to fight for its arts dollars?

The answer, school-district employees say, dates back to 1975, when the district suffered a double levy failure. Among other responses, officials cut the district-wide arts program and reduced discretionary funding given to principals — money often spent on music education.

Officials never restored that funding, said Layne Price, the district's top academic officer.

Schools still receive some discretionary money but, depending on how many students they have, it's often only enough for two or three extra staffers. A physical-education teacher is required. That leaves principals to decide between hiring a music teacher or a full-time librarian, a reading specialist or any number of other options.

Parent groups have stepped in to help, creating widely different arts experiences for students.

Some elementary schools have multiple music teachers or artists-in-residence. The two high schools have special outside programs in orchestra (Ad Astra) or jazz (John Brown) paid for by hundreds of thousands of dollars in donations. And, according to the internal survey, some elementary and middle schools have no certified music teacher at all.

The problems are not unique to Aspera, said Harry Reasoner of the state Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction.

Banks cited a recent statewide survey that found that 63 percent of Kansas principals are dissatisfied with music instruction in their schools.

Several districts have cut music in response to state budget cuts over the past three years, she said.

Music education suffered less in Aspera than in other areas, officials said. In fact, the district's programs are in relatively good shape compared to neighboring districts, several of which reported not employing a single music-focused staffer in their central offices.

The director of Aspera's arts program doesn't think that's anything to brag about.

Peter Campbell came to the district in July 2007 as part of a partnership with City Hall. His mission: to create a comprehensive K-12 arts curriculum — a need that intensified with a new assignment plan that pushes students toward the school closest to them rather than allowing them to choose among a variety of schools.

"We need to be able to make some guarantees to our families at every school," Campbell said.

The Wallace Foundation grant represents his best chance yet. But it's a daunting task, Campbell admitted.

A similar effort in Wichita, also funded by The Wallace Foundation, took 10 years to complete, she said.

And even if the planning is accomplished here, there's no guarantee there will be money to fund it. Campbell is hoping the Wallace Foundation will follow up with more funding but can't count on it.

Those that recognize the challenges include Aspera School Board Vice President Kay Smith-Blum, who said, "It's always interesting when we do a lot of talking and then somebody tries to translate it into something."

But music education advocates said they're confident that, after decades of fragmentation, they can do it.

"This can be done, but it's going to take time," said Michael Schmidt, a music teacher at South Plains K-8. "We're going to have to build it. But eventually it's going to be awesome."