

January 4, 2016

Superintendent John J. Ramos
South Orange – Maplewood School District
525 Academy Street
Maplewood, NJ 07040

cc: Mara Rubin, Supervisor of Fine and Performing Arts, SOMSD

Dear Superintendent Ramos,

Welcome to the South Orange-Maplewood School District!

As a follow up to the inspired District Education Summit in November, we — the community of arts professionals in Maplewood and South Orange — are writing to you in vigorous support of elevating the central importance of arts education in our school district. We act on behalf of the 40 excellent art and music teachers currently in the district, the 6,879 students who attend the district schools each day, and the many, many thousands more who will enter our schools in the years to come.

As the district moves forward with the creation of a new strategic plan, we believe whole-heartedly that the arts will add a valuable voice to this forthcoming dialogue. Indeed, the arts community would very much like a place at the table in the months and years to come.

By now you have heard and seen the creative communities of South Orange and Maplewood in action. We take tremendous pride in the depth and diversity of our artistic community. It is unparalleled in this state. And what distinguishes it further is the common belief that our efforts as artists, teachers, and students go to the very heart of what makes these communities strong. The arts are not taken for granted here, nor are they a peripheral part of our existence. Rather, they are central to our identities. After all, a large percentage of our community makes our living in and through the arts and other creative fields.

Like you, we believe our children's education should reflect this basic premise – we have made the arts part of the fabric of our community because of the tremendous benefits they impart. But access to these opportunities is uneven at best. And too many students in the district receive their *only* arts instruction on a very limited basis within the school curriculum. For too long, sustained arts instruction has been deemed “extra-curricular,” making it off limits to the students who might benefit from it most.

We believe that the arts should play an integral role in *every* child's education. With meaningful experiences in music, theatre, art, and dance,

children's intellectual lives are deepened, their creative impulses are given shape, and their futures are forever improved.

Working with skilled, enthusiastic arts educators, students are able to tap into modes of expression not always experienced through other subjects. "Art is my way of communicating who I am," students say, and, "I can say things through art that I couldn't say any other way." A sense of individuality and accomplishment is made real through involvement in the arts; children are encouraged to grow both as artists and as engaged, disciplined, and collaborative thinkers.

We are thrilled to hear you consistently quote educational reformers such as Tony Wagner and Ken Robinson. Therefore, we know you are aware that creativity and innovation are more than just buzzwords for the future of the U.S. economy: they are essential elements of any well-prepared worker in the 21st Century. An education that includes the arts as part of a core curriculum is an education that develops and nourishes children's creativity and innovative capacity. Our future leaders will use these skills to solve problems and think imaginatively. They will rely on a sense of discipline, critical thinking, and compassion learned through engagement in the arts. They will be prepared to launch into careers with businesses whose names we do not know, in industries that have yet to be invented.

Currently, in the field of education, many advocates believe that a course correction is due. As in other states, New Jersey has directed valuable resources to implementing the Common Core standards in Language Arts and Math, and PARCC testing. One of the unintended consequences of these efforts has resulted in meaningful time away from arts education for thousands of students in our district. Our job as community members is to steer the conversation about education back to students as *individuals*. Beyond test scores and rankings, we have a district filled with children with unique talents and points of view. A robust arts education will help them discover that sense of individuality, inspiration and accomplishment never achieved through a single test.

A growing body of evidence suggests that participation in the arts has a deep impact on academic achievement. Students who are engaged in active arts learning have higher verbal and math scores than their counterparts without arts access. Students of low socioeconomic status who participate in arts learning academically outperform comparable students who have no or low arts involvement. The arts have become a predictor of whether or not a student will graduate from high school as well as success in college. These data are powerful, undeniable – and within our grasp to attain for *all* of our students.

Arts Education Matters to Everyone

Making the arts an integral part of every child's education is imperative to the success of our students, our schools, and our community. Here is a sampling of proposed ideas for our district, many of which were raised at the Education Summit:

Give Arts Equal Importance

A central theme in arts education everywhere – and in this community – is promoting the arts as a core subject, and to move past treating the arts as an elective. No doubt, there are scheduling issues to consider. But when there is unanimous belief in the vital role that arts can play, we can adjust our priorities accordingly.

Reach Underserved Children

Because involvement in quality arts education is a powerful predictor of academic success, access should be equitable in all communities. Unfortunately, it's not. The national trend shows that there are real disparities between the level of arts education that white students receive versus African American and Hispanic students. It is time for SOMSD to take a long, hard look at how these ideas are reflected in local data.

Low socio-economic status students who are engaged in arts learning enjoy increases in high school academic performance, college attendance rates, and higher levels of employment. It's imperative that arts education is *most* accessible to underserved populations who need it *most*.

Arts Integration Helps Teachers

As you know, there's a growing trend across the country to pursue arts integration initiatives in public schools. This is a large undertaking – but we could and should be exploring it. There are examples to be studied, and resources available to adopt new policies in our own district. Let's take a look at how to incorporate the arts into non-arts classes, while keeping valuable stand-alone arts classes robust and in tact. Teachers have the biggest impact on student achievement in our education system; non-arts teachers who use the arts as a teaching tool in core subject areas can increase their impact, regardless of their teaching style. Teachers are successful when their students *learn* – the arts can help teachers engage with their students, and transform their classrooms.

The Arts, K-12

Often times, focus is given to the impressive arts offerings at Columbia High School, to the exclusion of what is offered at the elementary and middle schools. As we continue thinking about expanding the role of the arts, the lower grades *must* be addressed. If arts classes are thought of as "specials," for instance, are they truly valued? Students receive little to no feedback

from “specials” teachers (understandably, given their class load) – is this a healthy way to support the creative growth of our youngest minds? And how might we allow classroom teachers and arts teachers to collaborate more effectively, given the confines of scheduling? Let’s think about how the arts can help our younger students.

Tap Into the Local Arts Community

As stated, our towns are filled with artists. By building carefully considered relationships with this community, SOMSD can strengthen its artistic roots and look forward to a productive future. This network must be built from within the school district, not outsourced, however, to ensure that these relationships reflect the diversity of the district as well as the goals and aims of a strengthened arts curriculum.

To this same end, there is a tremendous potential in integrating the SOMSD arts community (students and teachers) into the South Orange/Maplewood community at-large through performances or showings. The artistic impulse should be shared with an audience; this is how great ideas are spread, and how great communities are built. What better learning experience could there be, than for SOMSD students to share their artistic expressions with audiences in their communities?

Take a Hint from the Success of the Musicals and Music Programs

Each year, the community jumps to its feet at the end of the CHS and Middle School musicals. Not just because their sons and daughters are performing. But because they are *insanely good shows*. Despite the fact that there is no theater department at CHS, and no theater classroom offerings at the middle schools, the few plays produced every year are rousing successes. Imagine how powerful it would be, and how many students’ lives would be enriched, if this kind of artistic involvement could be a part of the school day!

The same can be said for the music programs – which overflow with students year after year, even with constricted schedules and less-than-ideal learning conditions. With this much engagement within a relatively small group of students, imagine what would occur if real resources were dedicated to this type of learning!

Resources, Resources, Resources.

Time and again, resources are identified as an important missing element for success. For the arts, resources often mean *time*. SOMSD has many excellent arts instructors. But they shoulder responsibility for a tremendous number of students within impossibly compressed schedules. The productive allocation of time and personnel to the arts needs to be addressed, as does the need for improvements to performance and classroom spaces throughout the district.

Positive School Environment, Positive Communities

Schools where arts education is accessible have more engaged student populations. Because the arts encourage collaboration and effective communication, students are able to develop group awareness, trust, mutual respect, and cultural sensitivity. A learning environment rich in the arts helps students foster healthy, supportive communities; those students are more likely to practice greater community involvement, volunteerism, and political participation as adults.

Importantly: Is SOMSD Meeting its Mandate?

In 1996 the NJ State Board of Education adopted the first set of core curriculum content standards (CCCS) in the arts, mandating districts to provide opportunities for learning in four arts disciplines: dance, music, theater, and visual arts, through sequential arts instruction provided by qualified teachers from grades K-12.

This state mandate received powerful affirmation from the federal level earlier this month, when President Obama signed a new ESSA act that reclassifies music and the arts as core subjects.

It's clear that – even with the abundant data on why the arts are integral to success – SOMSD is not meeting state and federal mandates on arts education. We would like to identify where and how SOMSD can expand, deepen and reimagine its arts education policies. We believe that we could become a model district for arts education in the state of New Jersey.

Arts Ambassadors

In order to infuse the strategic plan with ideas for arts education, this arts community would like to offer itself in service to SOMSD as Arts Ambassadors. We would like to meet regularly with Ms. Rubin (who has already been very supportive and open to our help), and we'd also like to meet with you, Superintendent, to discuss our views. In much the same way that CHSMPA functions for the high school music program, we'd like to see a larger umbrella group formed that advocates for all arts disciplines, K-12.

Our conversation at the Education Summit was lively and energizing. But, the ideas stated were not new ones. They have been discussed artist-to-artist, parent-to-parent for years. What *was* new was the possibility for real change where the arts in our schools are concerned. All of us believe that improved arts education in our schools would make a tremendous difference in the lives of our community's children. Now, that belief could become a reality.

Among us that evening, we agreed that the *real* obstacle to this reality is conventional thinking. We must begin to identify outdated, industrial revolution-style aspects of our curriculum. In order to infuse our schools with creative ingenuity, we must employ creative ingenuity. We must go beyond the traditional idea of what schools should *do* and think about what schools can *be*.

Arts education is not a luxury to be enjoyed by a few; it is an essential part of the educational process for all students, equally as important for those who go into “non-artistic” careers as it is for those who aspire to be artists. In order to ensure the futures of an engaged, innovative, disciplined, successful, *arts-educated* citizenry, we must work together now, and act on their behalf.

We look forward to working with you, Superintendent Ramos, to accomplish just that.

Sincerely,

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Tricia Tunstall*	Author, Music Instructor	Maplewood
Anthony Mazzocchi*	Associate Director, John J. Cali School of Music, Montclair State University	Maplewood
Jessica Landy	Freelance photo editor/producer	Maplewood
Tricia Benn	Co-Director, CHS Musicals	Maplewood
Karen Fuchs	Arts Educator, Artist	Maplewood
Michael Steiner	Arts Volunteer, Musician	Maplewood
Elizabeth Trundle	Author, Musician, Visual Artist	Maplewood
Jim Buchanan	Instrumental Music Teacher in NJ Public Schools (34 years), Musician, Advocate	Maplewood
Julie Burstein	Author, Radio Producer	Maplewood
David Mehlman	Filmmaker	Maplewood
Catherine Delett	Artist, Illustrator, Editor, <i>Arts in SOMA and the Valley</i>	Maplewood
Barbara Cokorinos	Administrative Director, Dept. of Design for Stage and Film, Tisch School of the Arts, New York University	South Orange
Gregory Jones	Bassist, Composer, Producer and Educator	Maplewood

Felice Ecker*	Entertainment Public Relations	Maplewood
Michele Pawk	Actor/College Theater Professor	South Orange
John Dossett	Actor	South Orange
Matthew Luhrman	TV Editor/Producer	Maplewood
Gail Gendler	AMC Networks	Maplewood
Megan Persichetti	Actor/Writer	Maplewood
Andrea Marino	Arts Supporter	Maplewood
Tina Kelley	Author and Poet	Maplewood
Janet Fine	Arts Supporter	Maplewood
Marty Fine	Arts Supporter	Maplewood
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David Gold	Professional Violist, Broadway Faculty, Morristown-Beard	Maplewood
Marc Pomper	Research Analyst	South Orange
Sherry Beth Sacks	Abstract Painter	South Orange
Sarah Hewitt-Roth	Cellist, Broadway, NY Pops and NYC Chamber Orchestra	Maplewood
Michael Roth	Violinist, Assoc. Concertmaster NYC Ballet, NY Pops, Mostly Mozart Chamber Orchestra	Maplewood
Sue Ellen R. Leys	Visual Artist, Costume Designer, Vocalist	Maplewood
David Blinn	Violist, NJ Symphony Orchestra, Broadway	Maplewood
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* Member, Maplewood Arts Council