Opinion: Right the ship in Quakertown Schools, don't wrong the students

By Phil Gianficaro

I've been a newspaper reporter for 38 years, and a columnist for Calkins Media since 2008. Love talking to and writing about folks from all walks of life who have an interesting story to tell.

An open letter to the Quakertown Community School District administration and board of education:

Today, with your financial sea angry and the storm raging, is when those of you who pledged to do what's best for the students are relied upon to steady the ship, not toss passengers over the side, in order to reach safe harbor.

Now is when you as educational governing bodies are expected to join hands and rise to meet those expectations of doing what's best for the students and parents of your school system. Now is the moment you can truly make your mark, by agreeing to a solution to the $4.7 million structural deficit without, as is as being considered, sawing away at art, music and sports programs as though they were insignificant branches of the tree of knowledge. Removing rungs on the ladder of learning is counterproductive to providing all students the optimal path to achievement.

Disciplines such as art and music are usually the first casualties of the educational budgetary war. They are viewed — and quite wrongly, I emphasize — as expendable extras, background vocals to the quartet headliner of science, technology, engineering and math, or STEM. Perhaps due to the pressures school districts experience to score well on state and national testing in common core subjects, music and art have often been inaccurately characterized as luxuries, the shore house and speed boat of education.

Before deciding that sports, art and music can be reduced or eliminated without harmful consequences, those of you whose office walls are littered with advanced degrees and fancy certificates should be reminded their benefits during developmental years are practically immeasurable.

Studies have shown music improves behavior, concentration, awareness, listening, cooperation. Neuroscience research has shown that children involved in music have larger growth of neural activity than children not in music training. Early instrumental training improves the connection between both hemispheres of the brain. The benefit lasts through adulthood, and improves concentration and verbal skills.

In fact, Harvard University President Drew Faust in 2014 wrote of the benefits of the arts and humanities. Groundbreaking work of cognitive neuroscientists reveals what we think are extras are actually central to mind-strengthening. Studying music or a foreign language as a child might do more to
benefit the adult brain and long-term economic prospects than studying biology. Other studies identify a strong relationship between sustained involvement in instrumental music across middle and high school and high level math proficiency in 12th grade.

Arts programs improve motor skills, decision making, language development, visual learning, inventiveness and cultural awareness. And one other thing: A report by Americans for the Arts indicates that young people who participate regularly in the arts are four times more likely to be recognized for academic achievement, to participate in a math and science fair or to win an award for writing an essay or poem than children who don’t participate in the arts.

In addition to the obvious health benefits, sports participation improves self-esteem, concentration, discipline, social skills, crisis management abilities and teamwork — all key components in society and the workplace.

The shore house and the speedboat? Hardly. Music, art and sports are critical slabs of an educational foundation. Take note: Don't brush them away.

Students and parents are watching. They're relying on both school governing bodies to right the ship, get it to port, find the solution.

For if you don't, perhaps those programs are not what truly need to go.

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Phil Gianficaro: 215-345-3078; email: pgianficaro@calkins.com; Twitter: @philgianficaro