



Arts Education in Maryland Schools

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To the Frederick County Public Schools Board of Education:

6/12/24

Subject: Preserve Dance Program at Urbana High School

Arts Education in Maryland Schools is a statewide 501(c)(3) dedicated to ensuring that public school students in the state of Maryland have equitable access to robust arts education. We advocate for this both on the basis of [Federal Law \(ESSA\)](#), which requires the arts as part of a well-rounded education, and [State law \(COMAR\)](#), which requires all Maryland public school students have access to dance, media arts, music, theatre, and visual art in grades PK-12 (access to experiences in grades PK-5, access to courses in grades 6-12). Research also shows the vital role that the arts play in whole-child development. The arts provide myriad benefits including strengthened critical thinking skills, social and emotional development, and sense of belonging.

AEMS has been following the budgeting process for the upcoming school year with great interest. We have been deeply heartened to see how the local community including parents, students, alumni, and educators came out in force to demonstrate the necessity and value of arts education in the public school experience when it appeared that funding for 4th grade instrumental music would not be included in the new year's school budget. Instrumental music education, especially in the early grades, boosts neuroplasticity, synchronizes the brain's cerebral hemispheres, and strengthens neural pathways; all of which produce long-lasting impacts on the brain ("[Music for Every Child.](#)" [San Francisco Conservatory of Music](#)). **Thank you for listening to the voices of your community** and reinstating 4th grade instrumental music into your budget. An education without the arts is not a world-class education, and the learning experiences of Frederick students will be richer for their access to and participation in instrumental music learning.

While we are encouraged by Frederick County maintaining access to 4th grade instrumental music, a new arts education access issue has come to our attention that we hope you will be able to address. The Board voted to increase the size of classes, consequently leading to decisions around the reallocation of staff. This has resulted in the involuntary excess of the **sole dance teacher** currently placed at Urbana High School, Melissa Jones. We are deeply concerned about the effects of reallocating this dance educator, one of only a handful of dance educators working in the entire county. According to data from the [Maryland Arts Education Data Project](#), as recently as SY21-22, there were only 5 dance educators working in Frederick County, and all at the high school-level, despite [COMAR 13A.04.16.01 requiring students to have access to dance](#) experiences in PreK to 5 and the opportunity to specialize and be prepared for post-secondary education and careers in dance in grades 6 to 12.

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Involuntarily excessing Ms. Jones from her position would abruptly end Urbana High School's longstanding tradition of dance excellence. Removing dance from the curricular program removes the opportunity for students to participate in FCPS All County Dance and the Maryland All-State Dance Festival, where FCPS students often receive scholarship offers for colleges and universities. Dance is often a prohibitively expensive private activity. Offering dance in FCPS schools is not only a regulatory imperative, but corrects for the financial inequities that gatekeep arts participation from lower-income families.

We understand that difficult decisions are a part of the processes of both adaptation and change in administering a school system; however, we respectfully request that you **reconsider this reallocation decision**. While a data-driven, numerical approach to reallocation may justify Ms. Jones's involuntary excessing, a contextualized, nuanced understanding of her **unique role** demands that **exceptional actions** be taken in order to preserve this precarious yet required arts discipline within Frederick County Public Schools' curricular offerings. Individual arts teachers like Ms. Jones are often the lifeblood of arts programs. If a district reallocates math teachers around the school system, all students will still be taught math. Reallocating a dance teacher (one of less than ten in Frederick's case) will result in an **entire school population losing access to dance completely**.

We ask that you take immediate action to preserve this high-quality program in your district. Your responsiveness to the advocacy around 4th grade instrumental music gives us hope that you are listening and ready to take action to ensure your students are given the best education possible. **Every child, every day**, deserves access to the high quality arts education provided by FCPS's excellent educators and schools.

Sincerely,

Rachel McGrain
Executive Director