

# DAILY NEWS

## How to safeguard arts education for NYC kids

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### Opinion

By Michael Presser New

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It began with the musical “Cats” and a few dozen kids from one high school. I’ll never forget their faces when they took their seats before that matinee in 1982. Since many had never been to Broadway before, they would never forget the day.

In the 40 — yes, 40 — years since, thousands of New York City students have been to Broadway shows — “Dreamgirls” and “Les Miz” were some early highlights. More recently, thousands more have participated in various school arts and education programs through Inside Broadway, the nonprofit I’m proud to oversee. Our mission has always been the same: bring arts to the schools, and schools to the arts.

Why am I telling you this? Because arts funding in our public schools is perpetually threatened, and I have a measure to help slow the tide: Arts in education needs its own line in the New York City education budget. Sounds simple, but it would be a big deal. A big deal that changes lives.

A separate line for arts in education — which is to say, a dedicated amount of funding that the public can see every single year — would give it parity with other worthy academic disciplines like English and math, as it deserves, and would also make it harder to be cut. It would also send a message to the world, and be a small victory for culture while developing an audience for the future.

I’ve seen up close, year after year, the good that arts in education can do, how it can expand young minds, provide joy in the middle of stressful lives and, yes, even spark future careers. It helps motivate kids to come to school. Failing to connect kids to music, visual arts, dance and theater here in the country’s cultural capital would be unthinkable.

But perennially, my colleagues and I have had to fight for the funding to help make it happen.

Arts education is just a fraction of our city's \$34 billion school spending, and a substantial portion of it is buried in the Department of Education ledgers under school supplies, making it easy to cut or eliminate in tight budget years. Some of that money goes to outside organizations like ours.

I'm not saying creating a budget line would halt future cuts — that's as unrealistic as trying to stop the rain — but it would be a little bit of insurance. And I'm certainly not alone in fighting for arts money. The City Council, through its Cultural After School Adventures program has annually supported arts programming in district schools.

But I've worked with five mayors — six, if you include Eric Adams — and I've seen the complex budget-making process up close. Budget season is a yearly dance, but it's time to make the symbolism of arts in education having its own line a reality.

I had a great relationship with Mayor Ed Koch. Still, the first thing he did every budget season was to cut public funding for the arts, which applied to my organization and others that didn't work in the schools. But we both had roles to play in this drama, as scripted as a Broadway play.

In the end, Koch always restored the funding — even sometimes more than we'd asked for in the first place. He looked decisive when he made those cuts. And then magnanimous when he restored them. But he was actually a fan of the arts and willing to go to bat for them when push came to shove.

There have been other measures to protect arts funding in the schools over the decades. A 1997 initiative by Mayor Giuliani and then-Chancellor Rudy Crew called "Project Arts" earmarked a certain amount of arts funding for each city school. But it was reduced a decade later by Mayor Bloomberg, and arts funding once again became an add-on, as it always was, and the where-do-we-cut? dance began anew.

Our program to take our city's students to see "Cats" back in 1982 expanded beyond my wildest dreams. So has Inside Broadway's longevity. We now offer various activities in schools that bring artists directly to the students.

Naturally, these programs all cost money. But they create jobs, and paychecks for those who work in school-related programs like ours, including teaching artists, actors, musicians, dancers and visual artists.

The struggles are real, I speak with other arts and educational leaders, who like me, have devoted their life to this cause. We all agree: Our city's young people are worth it.

Over the last 40 years, our nonprofit has changed and so has our city, but the looks on the kids' faces are the same. Let's protect the funding — a rounding error, truly, when you look at the city budget.

*Presser is the founder and executive director of Inside Broadway, now celebrating its 40th anniversary season.*