

'The Four 'R's'

By James Wallace

Once upon a time in Greek society, an oral tradition meant sharp storytelling and listening skills. This was the primal exchange of ideas, events, and the underpinnings of relationships and community. For the ancient Greeks, an oral tradition of performance dialogue is what today would constitute a form of artistic expression, or music making. For them, the fourth 'R' was a subject as essential to society as the others.

Today we focus on three 'R's- reading, writing, 'rithmetic- with the 'No Child Left Behind Act' our more recent attempt to fix the public education system, by testing our way out of mediocrity and failure. In terms of succeeding, perhaps its best hope is in keeping more 'behinds' in school seats, longer. But what does this say about us as a society? Today, many college graduates can't spell, fewer of us read, and those who count mostly use a calculator.

True, we want to get back to the 'fundamentals.' But if we want to make progress, we need to inspire. Kids aren't dumb. We need to present course material not for the sake of being tested, but for its own sake. When you challenge students to discover themselves and the world, they refine their skills in the process. We should be breeding a culture that embraces lifelong learning. This means extending the school curriculum beyond the testable numbers crunching.

So why does any of this matter? When we turn our backs on human undertakings in the arts, for the sake of testing the three 'R's, we cut off our own potential. Why the relevance of a fourth 'R?' How about teamwork, cooperation, listening, working towards and achieving goals? Our own version today of the fourth 'R' is participation in arts ensembles like band, orchestra, dance, choir, jazz ensemble, and theater.

Want to grow up to become a carrier pilot or a world-class surgeon? Arts instruction and instrument playing for kids builds precision, dexterity, coordination, concentration, and an ability to express emotions, including joy. Playing together, performing for and exciting a crowd, learning and sharing together, responding to directions- these are terrific building blocks for personal growth. And everybody wins!

When we turn our backs on the arts, the result in society is predictable- louder, and harder, not considered and reasoned. Let's turn over a new leaf with education and learning. Let's be inspired and move forwards again, with language and expression. Take it from the Greeks? As a society in the new millennium, we can start by listening and publicly supporting our own, fourth 'R.'