

Arts in schools under siege

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Fifth-grader Sinai Dimas loves being a part of the mariachi group at San Jose's Horace Mann School -- and so does her father, Alejandro.

"I am really happy because the program benefits her with her classes, and she just loves it," he said.

Horace Mann Principal Juan Correa isn't surprised by the reaction. "I believe music is one of the few activities you use both sides of your brain, and that it helps students and exposes them to new things," he said.

But extracurricular arts programs such as Horace Mann's mariachi group are facing extinction in a climate of budget cuts and lean times that have hit California hard even before the economic downturn two years ago.

With an emphasis on the California state standards testing, school administrators are being forced to make difficult decisions when it comes to music, art, and sports -- programs many educational experts say enriches children's lives beyond reading, writing and arithmetic.

"Music programs are important to schools because they provide a curriculum that rounds out what kids should be learning," said Marcela Davison Aviles, executive director of the Mexican Heritage Plaza. "English, science, social studies, math, technology and the arts allow us to realize who we are as humans and how we connect to each other."

Aviles' group is so passionate about preserving arts programs it has held fundraisers to support San Jose schools such as Horace Mann. The Mexican Heritage Corporation recently held a benefit concert at San Jose State University featuring Los Tigres Del Norte, a Grammy-winning band from San Jose.

The group attracted about 1,000 people to the Event Center for a Save The Music for Our Kids concert last weekend.

Sinai, 12, endorsed the effort by Los Tigres, often called "Regional Mexican music's greatest statesmen." If Mann's mariachi program is disbanded, "I would be very sad,

and try to do a fundraiser for it," said Sinai, a slight girl with short brown hair and brown eyes.

Some of the concert's proceeds will be used to help Mexican Heritage Corporation programs and the San Jose Mariachi and Mexican Heritage Festival. Officials will leverage concert funds with grants from the Castellano Family Foundation, Hewlett Foundation, and National Endowment for the Arts. (The Castellano Family Foundation is a sponsor of the Mosaic San Jose High School Journalism Workshop.)

It was a high-energy event from the beginning. The concert attracted fans that danced and sang along with the music.

Despite such fundraising efforts, the situation remains bleak for extracurricular programs in California's public schools. It's the same across the nation where districts are facing their deepest budget cuts since the recession of the mid-1980s.

A 2009 study funded by the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation found that 89 percent of California schools fell short of the state's goals for arts education. It reported that 61 percent of schools didn't have one full-time arts specialist, and students attending "high-poverty" schools had less access to arts instruction than those in more affluent communities.

Among the recommendations, the report's authors said that educators must show that the arts are a core subject.

"We need to let our elected officials know we value culture, let them know art is more than painting and drawing," said Brian Taylor, chairman of the San Jose State University art department. "Art education teaches people problem solving and innovation." James Catterall, a professor of urban schooling at the University of California-Los Angeles, found in a 10-year study that students who studied music achieved higher test scores regardless of ethnicity.

Some policy-makers understand the value of the programs. But it still costs money to fund them.

"As a community we will have to become more creative to bring art and music into schools," said Leon F. Beauchman, a member of the Santa Clara County board of education.

Aviles has led the charge in creativity through the Mexican Heritage Corporation's fundraisers. Supporters like her have become the last line of defense in saving these programs.

"If you take art and music out of school, you take the heart out of the schools," Aviles said.