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## HISD struggles to provide instruction in arts

'It's a tough situation. I refuse to not teach everything I can,' says teacher Lucretia Copeland.



By Ericka Mellon

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A few times a day, Lucretia Copeland, the art teacher at Herrera Elementary, wheels a red wagon outside to fill two coolers with water from a hose. Her classroom, in a trailer, lacks a sink, and her students often need to rinse

Mayra Beltran/Houston Chronicle

David White helps tune cellos during orchestra class at Williams Middle School in Acres Homes. White reinvigorated the band program at Williams Middle School, and started an orchestra program with donations from business connections. He still has a cabinet full of instruments that need repairs, but lacks the funds.

paint brushes or clean glue off their hands.

Copeland said she has spent \$500 of her own money on art supplies in some years. She recently bought heavy cardstock and helped the children construct looms for a weaving project.

"It's a tough situation," she said. "But I refuse to not teach everything I can. I know these kids will not get it on the outside."

Copeland teaches in the Houston Independent School District, where students are not guaranteed specialized art and music classes - a contrast to their counterparts in many of the area's larger suburban districts. One official said HISD's fine arts offerings may fall short of requirements in state law.

"I've been in meetings with higher-ups and I've mentioned that, but I don't know how serious they might take that assertion that we're out of compliance," said Walter Smith Jr., the district's fine arts director, who has worked under superintendents Terry Grier and his predecessor, Abelardo Saavedra.

Texas requires public elementary and middle schools to provide instruction in art, music and theater at each grade level, covering curriculum standards called the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills. High Schools must cover two of the four areas: art, music, theater and dance. Districts can decide how to meet the mandates. A general third-grade teacher, for example, could cover the fine arts standards.

The state of fine arts education in the Houston school system has become a focal point for local arts advocates as cities like Chicago and Boston have undertaken campaigns to improve access and equity to develop more creative, well-rounded students.

At a school board meeting in October, Grier's academic chief, Dan Gohl, said district officials were developing a 10-year plan to improve fine arts instruction that would include partnerships with outside groups and six hours of training for staff on integrating the arts.

Many of the area's large districts guarantee that every elementary school has one art teacher and one music teacher and that every secondary school offers an array of fine arts classes. HISD - the state's biggest district, where most children come from poor families - makes no such promises.

Staffing decisions are left up to HISD principals, who, if their budgets are tight, must decide whether to hire, say, an orchestra teacher, a nurse or a couple of academic tutors.



"I've had a child go through an amazing school in HISD, and he had access to all of the arts," said Mary Curry Mettenbrink, executive director of Young Audiences of Houston, an organization focusing on arts in education. "To see that not every child has that opportunity is very saddening."

Young Audiences of Houston surveyed HISD elementary and middle schools and found that about 30 percent did not have at least one full-time certified fine arts teacher last school year. The picture may not quite so grim, however, because some have part-time instructors or use outside arts groups.

### ***TEA doesn't audit***

Principals most commonly cited funding, competing academic priorities, and accountability and testing pressures as barriers to arts education.

The Texas Education Agency does not audit schools to ensure they are meeting the fine arts requirements, said Jessica Snyder, special projects manager at the agency.

"It's the board of trustees' responsibility to ensure the district or school complies with all of the requirements," Snyder said.

Grier, who has led HISD since 2009, points to the school board's policy giving principals broad authority over their schools.

"It's the principals' decision," Grier said. "We give them their money, and they are responsible for developing a budget."

Grier's staff, however, is drafting a proposal that might reduce autonomy and mandate certain staffing for low-performing schools, Gohl said.

While HISD has some thriving arts programs, Smith lamented that too many students are unprepared to compete with their peers in other districts. Marching bands have dwindled to two or three dozen students, though he said Waltrip and Westside high schools remain strong with 75 to 100 participants.

### ***Many 'jump ship'***

"There are a lot of schools and teachers that are suffering," Smith said. "A lot of them jump ship and go to another district where they can get that support. Some just care enough about the kids to stay and keep hoping."

There is no district-wide budget for fine arts in HISD. Principals must decide whether to use school funds to buy band uniforms, instruments or art supplies, though the district applies for grants.

The VH1 Save The Music Foundation said it has provided 59 HISD schools with instruments since 2005, with the numbers dwindling in the last five years. The value has totaled \$1.75 million.

HISD's system differs from those of many other districts, which set minimum staffing rules.

For example, every Conroe ISD elementary school must have one art teacher and one music teacher. Junior high schools must have two art teachers and one director for each: band, orchestra and choir. High schools have even more fine arts employees.

Fort Bend ISD expanded its arts staffing this year with support from Superintendent Charles Dupre, a former high school band member whose wife is an artist. Every middle school now has a certified choir teacher, for instance, and the district recently spent \$3.2 million for instruments and equipment.

"That sort of made up for almost 10 years of having very little capital outlay," said James Drew, director of fine arts for Fort Bend ISD. "Some instruments literally were falling apart in kids' hands."

State budget cuts in 2011 delayed an effort in Klein ISD to have an art specialist at every elementary school, but the district was able to complete the hiring last year, said fine arts director Monte Mast. The district also used voter-approved bond funds to renovate campuses to accommodate an art teacher.

### ***Band program grows***

In 2008, then-HISD Superintendent Saavedra included \$10 million in the budget for fine arts. But, Smith recalled, some principals spent the money elsewhere.

HISD schools that have magnet fine arts programs get extra funding, but regular neighborhood campuses or those with other themes do not get designated arts dollars.

Calvin Hutson, the band director at Key Middle School in north Houston, said he received \$80,000 to rebuild the program five years ago thanks to the superintendent. Grier said he did not recall the source of the funds.

Hutson said he has increased the band program from maybe a dozen students to about 200.

"These are the kids that you don't see on the suspension list because they actually have a reason to come to school and feel good about coming to school," Hutson said.

A similar story has played out at Williams Middle School in the Acres Homes neighborhood. Music director David White, hired last year, found a program where students had not been taught to read

music and donated instruments had fallen into poor condition.

### ***'Jingle Bells' on its way***

White said he brought in his own instruments, received donations from his contacts in the music business and turned to eBay. The principal provided about \$10,000 for repairs, but White said he has dozens of instruments he can't afford to fix.

"Principals have a lot on their plate to deal with as far as test scores," White said. "I think a lot of times they look at the fine arts pieces as something that is good for the school but it's not necessarily essential."

For sixth-grader Monaire Johnson, the chance to play the viola at Williams was a welcome surprise. He said he played the guitar as a second-grader in Mississippi but his last HISD elementary school didn't have a band or orchestra program.

"It's fun," Johnson said, taking a break from strumming "Jingle Bells." "Next week we get to use our bows."

*Arts advocates are holding public meetings to gather input on how to give more Houston Independent School district students access to arts education. The meetings will be at the Young Audiences offices, 4550 Post Oak Place Dr.*

*6 p.m. Nov. 3*

*8:30 a.m. Nov. 7*

*noon Nov. 12*

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