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JSOnline Opinion Page

Literacy program uses the arts

Milwaukee Public Schools Superintendent Gregory Thornton's recent proposal to create a special fund to provide a limited number of arts, music and physical education instructors is a step in the right direction, albeit a small one. For those efforts, I applaud him, but I believe we can do more.

Thornton said, "It's not acceptable for any set of schools not to have anything in the area of arts. It's just not acceptable." Again, I agree. The role of using visual arts to improve students' reading, writing and overall literacy has seen success right here in MPS schools. For the past 16 years, SHARP Literacy, a nonprofit organization based in Milwaukee, has successfully implemented programs for the most disadvantaged students that utilize the visual arts to stimulate reading and writing abilities.

The program has been especially effective with early childhood literacy, which is the cornerstone for later success and academic achievement. This is not a program that teaches children to draw or paint or doodle. It is a curriculum designed by educators integrating visual arts into the learning process. SHARP also has produced and published a series of books and teaching guides used in the classroom.

By energizing urban school children to become more confident, capable readers and writers, outcomes have shown that students in the SHARP program read and write 40% to 70% better than those not in the program. Through guidance provided by SHARP, teachers benefit from in-depth workshops and professional development geared toward enhancing their teaching skills.

And this is not isolated to just a handful of students. Last year alone, more than 5,500 students and educators in 32 Milwaukee schools participated in this privately funded program. More regarding SHARP's results can be found at <http://www.sharpliteracy.org/what-we-do/our-results>

If SHARP's program is able to achieve such impressive results on this scale, imagine the success if it were rolled out to every elementary school in the district. When he submits his budget proposal to the board next month, I ask Thornton to consider the success SHARP has had and that he will include its program as part of the overall arts initiative. Our children deserve nothing less.

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