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School Board Hears Of Nome's Need For Arts Education

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By Megan Gannon

Last week educators and the Nome Public Schools Board of Education discussed ways to bring more arts into the classrooms.

During the regular board meeting, Nome Elementary School Principal Elizabeth Korenek-Johnson said that a lot of work went into bringing back the traditional holiday program and really showcased what music brings to kids' lives. The gym was decorated with banners and students got to sing and perform for their families.

"I think that just goes to show how much our community misses having an elementary school music program," Korenek-Johnson said. Nome Public Schools' long-time music director Ron Horner retired at the end of the school year in 2018. Korenek-Johnson added that some teachers, such as Katie Bourdon, were making up for the lack of a music program by incorporating music into their classrooms: "She has a piano in her classroom and they sing songs as they're wrapping up the day and their transitions throughout the day."

Still, Korenek-Johnson advocated for the return of a music program at the elementary school if the district's budget would allow it. "I don't know if it needs to go back to a shared position with Beltz, or whatever we can do, but it is dearly missed," she said.

Board member Marjorie Tahbone suggested that partnerships with the Nome Arts Council could potentially help organize events like the holiday program. "I can see that being an effort that maybe the community could step in on because that is something that's just so beautiful to see," Tahbone said.

During her report, Lisa Leeper, principal of Anvil City Science Academy, told the board she planned to go to Anchorage this month to take part in a program called the Rural Arts Initiative. The program aims to integrate the arts—whether that's visual arts, music, theater or cultural arts—as much as possible throughout the district. Leeper emphasized that this doesn't necessarily mean establishing formal classes or programs.

"What we need to do is try to help teachers learn how art doesn't need to be a separately taught thing—that it can be part of what you do in the other subjects," Leeper said. She also noted that Nome has so many talented people already that the district could find ways to bring them into schools to collaborate with teachers and add special value to lessons.

The district is supposed to have two volunteer representatives to take part in the initiative, Leeper said. She is looking for anyone from the community who can help. Those volunteers don't necessarily need to be artists but should have a passion for the arts and connections to it. The student board member, high school senior Dot Callahan, offered her perspective on how more arts classes would benefit the student body. She connected a lack of options for arts classes to the rise of vaping in Nome-Beltz Middle/High School.

"I just think that bringing back our arts program full time with band and filmmaking and stuff like that would help decrease the usage because then it takes kids' attention away from drugs and puts it towards more of a positive matter," Callahan said. She also noted that many of her fellow classmates would be interested in assisting arts programming for younger students. "I know National Honor Society and Educators Rising are always looking for opportunities to come and work with younger kids," Callahan said.

Nome-Beltz Principal Teriscovkya Smith explained that the administration knows the need for art classes is there, but because of staffing issues, adding art classes has come at the expense of electives in subjects like history and English. "Next to a Life 101 course that seniors year after year have asked for, the most asked-for class is some sort of an art class," Smith said. "The student feedback when we reduced from three classes to one was overwhelming."