The arts are an essential part of public education. From dance and music to theater and the visual arts, these programs give children a means of expression that helps capture their passions and emotions, allowing them to explore new ideas. The arts touch every aspect of our lives.

The arts can play a crucial role in improving students’ ability to learn because they can make use of a range of intelligence and learning styles. Schools that incorporate music, art, drama, dance and creative writing into their curricula have found that teaching the arts has significantly affected a student’s overall success in school. I believe the success is based on the fact that the arts are closely associated with important ideas and events in history. Students who have a good background in the arts are likely to have more information and insight.

Education of the arts not only enhances students’ understanding of the world, it also broadens their perspective on academics. The arts allow us the creativity to express ourselves while challenging our intellect. Art and musical expression exercises the right side of the brain—the intuitive portion—which focuses on the left side.

According to experts, it is necessary to exercise or use both sides of the brain to maintain balanced emotions. The arts unite life and learning are essential in the development of the whole person. The arts can change the classroom environment, making learning a lively and rewarding experience. With their emphasis on creative discovery and their ability to stimulate a variety of learning styles, the arts create enthusiasm and motivation for learning. The arts also teach discipline, the value of determination to achieve excellence and the rewards of hard work. Creativity is crucial to the learning process and useful in many fields including architecture, engineering, physics, chemistry and mathematics. Overall it helps to incorporate the creative expression of thought.

From my point of view, the arts are just as important as any other subject. In many high schools, though science and math are priorities and the arts are considered less important. In recent years, there has been discussion about continuing these programs. Some feel that, because of budget problems, schools should cut music and theater programs to save money. I strongly disagree. What we learn in these classes is priceless. The arts challenge us to work hard, handle disappointment and encourage us to strive for perfection. My school definitely has a budget problem. They have already made many cuts in staff to help ease the deficit. It makes me wonder how far they will go. I hope my school will overcome its budget problems without discontinuing the arts.

The arts are my life, and through them, I have received many honors. I hope my school and others realize their importance and how beneficial they are to students, not only for what it teaches us in these fields, but also what it teaches us about the world and life.

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Space Exploration

by Michael Christopher, Clarence, NY

“I believe this nation should commit itself to achieving the goal, before the decade is out, of landing a man on the moon and returning him safely to earth. No single space project in this period will be more impressive to mankind, or more important for the long-range exploration of space, and none will be so difficult or expensive to accomplish.” This statement by President John F. Kennedy sparked excitement in the hearts of Americans and drove us to explore the heavens and travel to the moon. On July 20, 1969, this dream was realized when Neil Armstrong became the first human to walk on the moon. Despite the pride and several fringe benefits space travel has brought to the world, the public (as well as the federal government) has since lost interest in it. It is our obligation to rekindle this dream.

Since earliest times, it has been human nature to explore new frontiers. In our day, the frontier to explore has changed from the earth to the entire universe. Space is infinitely large, and possesses infinite possibilities for exploration. Space contains new materials which we might find useful. This new frontier offers unlimited land to colonize, mine, farm and even deposit waste. The most exciting prospect is the possibility of finding life beyond earth, which would question the essence of our being.

Many argue that the cost of exploring space is too high. With slightly more than 41 percent of government’s funding drawn from income tax, the public is right to consider that cost. To put a man on the moon during the Apollo program cost $100 billion (adjusted for current inflation). This is a lot of money, but when discussing government funding, the amount of money is always enormous. This $100 billion is only six percent of the $1.65 trillion our government collects annually. This amount is a relatively small investment of one year’s funding to support such an important and beneficial endeavor.

Besides the apparent accomplishments of space travel, there are many other benefits. Artificial satellites are a product of space exploration that now provide us with cell phone communications, defense recognizance, weather reports and many other useful advances. By May 1997 there were 2,300 functional satellites orbiting the earth. Many other technologies have their origin in space exploration. Water recycling was a result of conserving water on spacecrafts.

Energy is another precious commodity during space flight, therefore hydrogen fuel cells and solar cells have been developed. Besides powering space exploration, these technologies are now producing enormous amounts of clean energy here on earth. During space flights, astronauts are subject to weightlessness. Scientists and doctors are now studying the effects and benefits of weightlessness on the human body.

The future of human space exploration may lie in the hands of private individuals. In 1996 the X-Prize Foundation said that it would pay a $10 million prize to the private team that could build a reusable spacecraft that could take a person to the threshold of space at 62 miles high. This contest spurred lots of public interest and many attempts, and now the goal has actually been achieved.

Whether it is private enterprise or government agencies that bring us to space is not the issue. All that is important is that we do not ignore the human desire to explore new frontiers.

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Capital Punishment

by Kiri Sunde, Holland, MI

Picture this: You are on trial for committing murder and, although you are innocent, you are convicted. You are given the death penalty and your life is taken. Just like that. It is the end of everything – your family, your friends, your goals, your future. How can anyone support this? Capital punishment is inhumane and kills both the guilty and innocent. The death penalty promotes murder, contrary to its purpose, and should be outlawed.

The death penalty is immoral and barbaric. It is punishing murderers with murder, and encourages violence. Capital punishment, whether by lethal injection or electrocution, is brutal; it is deliberate manslaughter and first-degree murder. Do you spank a child as punishment for hitting someone? We are taught that two wrongs don’t make a right – more killing is not the solution.

Capital punishment contradicts American morals and values. The Declaration of Independence states that every person is endowed with the inalienable right to life. It is the government’s responsibility to protect its citizens’ lives, but by utilizing the death penalty it takes them away. Also, the Bill of Rights prohibits cruel and unusual punishment. Is murder not cruel? We are hypocrites to fight murder with murder. Capital punishment sends the message that in America, murder is acceptable and even the government will carry it out.

The death penalty does not solve anything and only creates more anguish. Not only must the families of those convicted deal with the criminal charges and trial, they must also cope with the death of a loved one. This is especially difficult for those who are innocent. Studies have shown that capital punishment does not serve as a deterrent for murder, as it was intended. It only puts us in a worse position than when we started.

Many American morals are derived from the Christian faith. The Bible has numerous verses that discourage the use of the death penalty. God has set an example by which we are to live. God will forgive anything, as long as you ask for forgiveness, and entreats you to “forgive those who trespass against us.” It also states that we should not seek revenge, which is exactly what we do when we execute someone. No one should kill in the first place, but killing as a means of punishment is just as bad.

One of the worst consequences of capital punishment is the inevitable times when the innocent are killed. Recently, 13 people on death row in Illinois were proven innocent just prior to their execution dates. The great pain they must have endured is incomprehensible. Imagine being murdered by your government for no reason, for doing nothing. It would be worse than the original crime with which they were charged. There is no undo button when you take someone’s life.

My school absolutely has a capital punishment problem. Why do we murder to try to prevent murder? We all need to take action to annul the death penalty. There is never justification for taking another’s life.