

viewpoint

Arts education is a reason to celebrate

point of view

The Rev. Kimberly Hyatt

As the nation observes Arts in Education Week Sept. 8-14, we in Jacksonville have extra reason to celebrate.

When Duval County Public School students returned to the classroom recently, they found more than 100 new music and visual arts teachers thanks to a push by Superintendent Nikolai Vitti, the School Board and the Jacksonville Public Education Fund to educate the whole child — and that's just during the school day.

This Monday, nearly 1,200 DCPS children, many from underserved populations, began 46 different yearlong after-school programs in music, dance, theatre and the visual arts provided by the Cathedral Arts Project, of which I am executive director.

Add to this the Aug. 22 announcement by the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts that CAP's application for Jacksonville to become the 14th site for its prestigious Any Given Child program was accepted and it's clear that those who care about public education in Duval County have good reason to rejoice.

Through Any Given Child, CAP and the Kennedy Center will work with the school district, the Mayor's Office, local arts organizations, along with civic, corporate and philanthropic leaders, to create a long-range, sustainable plan to provide access to quality arts education for all DCPS K-8 students.

In this Jacksonville joins cities from Austin and Baltimore to Portland and Tulsa that have reaped clear social, cultural and economic benefits through the Any Given Child program.

As a community, we should applaud, embrace and act upon this encouraging

recognition of the importance of a quality arts education.

Indeed, more and more policy makers, education advocates and concerned citizens recognize the role arts education plays in cultivating the skills students need to become not just culturally sensitive adults and creative thinkers but also innovative workers and civic-minded citizens who can help drive economic growth and promote a better quality of life for all.

At CAP, we are driven by our aspiration for every child to have access to a well-rounded, arts-rich education and guided by our belief that the arts can be a catalyst for extraordinary change in Northeast Florida.

And we have seen firsthand what arts education can do in the academic and social performance of our students.

For almost a decade now, more than 80 percent of DCPS students in our program have shown marked improvement in grades, behavior and other life skills after just one year of enrollment. An average of 90 percent of our students routinely earn high grades in reading and math, and more than half our students miss five or fewer days of school each year.

Beyond the statistics, though, we see the difference an arts education makes in the overall life of our children.

Congress has dedicated this week Arts in Education Week in order to "promote and showcase the immense role arts education plays in producing engaged, successful and college- and career-ready students." With all the good going on in arts education, Jacksonville has much to celebrate this week and beyond.

The Rev. Kimberly Hyatt is executive director of the Cathedral Arts Project.