

**Beyond the Marching Band:
Reconciling Cultural Traditions with Traditional Education**

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Opening Remarks by Dr. Andre M. Perry

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When I arrived to New Orleans about five years ago, the presence of music, history, and culture was almost overwhelming. Explicit forms of art and culture are so pervasive that it's horribly uninventive to describe New Orleans as an oversized music box or as a living monument. In New Orleans, people live in museums. Parades are not reserved for holidays. Music, visual arts, dance, food, and wine flavor the air we breathe. You can't simply live in New Orleans. You have to find your rhythm to dance in this space. Art, culture and history are deeply embedded everywhere - except for our schools.

There is a serious disconnect between what you see in the open air and what students experience in schools. Like other places in the United States, the arts are undervalued as evidence by our curriculums. You can find what is important in most organizations by looking at their budgets. Schools prioritize their values in curriculums. The subjects, lessons and pedagogical approaches provide an organizational statement of what is important. In other words, curriculums reveal what the school, local district and State feel students *should* know.

Whereas the streets of Treme are painted with sweaty Indian makeup, schools have a difficult time infusing that condition in their examinations of American history. In a place where the family members of Marsalis, Neville, Baptiste, Payton, Andrews, Paulin and others could fill a school with students and teachers, New Orleans public institutions struggle to find space for art and history in their classes.

Certainly state and federal mandates influence what is taught, and we must pay attention to macro level needs. However, there is a danger that can occur when there is disconnect between what schools teach and how locals live. School must play the delicate balance of honoring local residents' contributions while challenging and advancing them. Schools must conserve aspects of the past and change culture, particularly those aspects of culture that are harmful to members of the community. However, if subjects as large and as important as art and culture are not placed under the microscope, the aspects of culture that we need to conserve may change and the things the community needs to progress may stay the same.

The cultural traditions of Mardi Gras Indians, artists, jazz musicians, and social aide and pleasure clubs are vital in shaping New Orleans' character and drawing tourists to the city, but appreciation for these traditions does not often translate into economic, educational and artistic empowerment for those who actually live the art culture. Something is missing. Support for high school marching bands for Mardi Gras has not led to robust music programs that produce as many fluent music readers as performers or provide deep understanding of music theory. Something is missing.

There is a serious achievement gap. We know that quantitative literacy and language arts differences exist along lines of race and class. However, a gap also exists between what we see outside our schools and what we teach inside. In Orleans it is the art and culture gap.