

# Deborah Hill Cone: We should be boosting the arts in schools not bleeding them dry

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Our education system has created a false dichotomy between arts and sciences, writes Deborah Hill Cone. Photo / 123RF

I left school at 16 because I was getting into trouble. I got caught smoking and bunked off school to be in the chorus line of a Hamilton Operatic Society's production.

I'd be classed as a failure by Hekia Parata's data-driven education system, but ya-boo-sucks I still managed to scrape an A in stage 2 statistics at university. So I feel qualified enough to assert this. Data - which Minister Parata has made the centre of our education system - on its own, doesn't count for diddly.

Metrics - that is, what you choose to measure - matters more. We are what we pay attention to. An organisation becomes its metrics. But in our education system, under Parata, we seem to be paying attention to the wrong things. Arts and creativity are valued less and less, squashed out, marginalised. This is going to have devastating consequences.

**ONE:** A crisis in arts teaching is putting this country's creative industries at risk, arts teachers say.

Music, drama and visual arts are being neglected because of underfunding and an obsessive focus on literacy and numeracy. Only half of children are achieving at the expected level of the curriculum in music and drama and the figures for dance and visual arts were low as well.

**TWO:** Youth mental health services are hitting breaking point with desperate parents reporting the system is so overloaded children have to be suicidal or self-harming just to get help. There has been an epidemic in diagnosis of various problems which are frequently classed as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder.

**THREE:** We use our creativity to process painful emotions. We are unique like that among creatures. As education legend Sir Ken Robinson pointed out, your dog might get depressed but he doesn't listen to Radiohead. And as for the ADHD explosion? Sir Ken: "If you sit kids down, hour after hour, doing low-grade clerical work, don't be surprised if they start to fidget, you know?" I'll grant you, point one and two may be unrelated, but I wouldn't bet on it.

**FOUR:** We have modelled our education system on America's No Child Left Behind Act, signed by President George Bush in 2002, which was obsessed with raising student standardised testing scores. But even the US has realised that didn't work and has scrapped the NCLB and modified its obsession on standardised testing.

*Continued below.*

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**FIVE:** Standardised testing has been found to stifle imagination and creativity in the classroom. This is not to say standardised testing is not useful. When you see the doctor you want to know what your cholesterol level is on a standardised measure compared to everybody else's. But education is not one-dimensional like cholesterol. The *Harvard Political Review* has concluded standardised testing leads to a one-size-fits-all curriculum that ignores the needs of individual students and does not prepare them for university or careers.



**SIX:** Without teaching in the arts, we will not be able to sustain world-class output in areas such as music and film. The New Zealand screen industry announced last week its revenue was \$3.22 billion in 2015 up from \$3.16b a year earlier. Learning a specific skill set doesn't have the value in today's world that it once did. Learning how to be more creative and thus adaptable is what prepares students for life beyond the classroom and is what forward-thinking companies want.



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**SEVEN:** No one is average. Everyone is made up of a multitude of individual characteristics. This is called the Jaggedness Principle. In the 1940s the US Air force had to refit its fighter planes with adjustable seats. They had originally designed around the average body measurements. They didn't fit a single one of the 4063 fighter pilots. This also explains why BMI is not an accurate measure of health. Yet this flawed thinking underpins our entire education system.

**EIGHT:** Our education system has created a false dichotomy between arts and sciences. We need both.  $E=MC^2$  required an intuitive or creative leap, and after followed the analysis. Einstein: "The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the source of all true art and science." I could do an interpretive dance about that if you like.

**NINE:** When Winston Churchill was asked to cut arts funding to support the war effort he was reported to have responded: "Then what are we fighting for?" Sadly, he didn't say that. But he did say: The arts are essential to any complete national life. The state owes it to itself to sustain and encourage them . . . Ill fares their race which fails to salute the arts with the reverence and delight which are their due."

**TEN:** We are all on own journey of curiosity and learning that lasts our whole life. There is no single right path. In fact, what makes you different in school - that is, likely to be classified a loser under our current standardised system which rewards compliance and conformity - may be the very thing that makes you unique or sought after in metrics of the real world. If it is not squashed out of you before then.

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