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City News: Farina Says Arts Teach Other Skills

By Leslie Brody

New York City Schools Chancellor Carmen Farina underscored the value of the arts Wednesday, telling a crowd of educators that painting, ballroom dancing, music and drama taught children to articulate their views and develop a work ethic.

"You revise, you edit, you rehearse, you perform and you reach mastery," she said. "All of these art processes are also the way we should be learning everything in school." Speaking at Face to Face 2014, a conference of arts educators at the City College of New York, Ms. Farina said she believed every middle school should have a theater program because drama can transport students from "where you are to what you can be."

In an apparent allusion to the challenges of her first months as chancellor, she joked that she hopes to go to the theater soon "so that I can escape life a little right now." Some critics have said her plans for fixing a system with wide achievement gaps and troubled schools are too vague. Parents and principals have staged rallies in recent weeks to protest state tests they said drained time from deeper learning.

Ms. Farina's vocal support for the arts stands in contrast to their shrinking role in many schools in recent years. A report released this month by New York City Comptroller, Scott M. Stringer, found that many schools violated state law by failing to provide minimum amounts of arts education.

It also found a steep decline over the past seven years in art-supply spending and opportunities for students, especially in low-income areas in the South Bronx and Central Brooklyn. Ms. Farina said the arts can help students hone analytical skills demanded by the Common Core, a set of higher academic standards schools are adopting. Poring over paintings in museums, for example, can help children learn to compare and contrast, and explaining their own creative projects can help them learn to talk about their work.

The crowd had representatives from many arts groups around the city that work with schools, including the New Victory Theater, Lincoln Center and Wave Hill, a public garden and cultural center. "She gets it," said Courtney J. Boddie, director of education at the New Victory Theater. "She gets how the arts can engage and inform students."