

Public Policy Memo

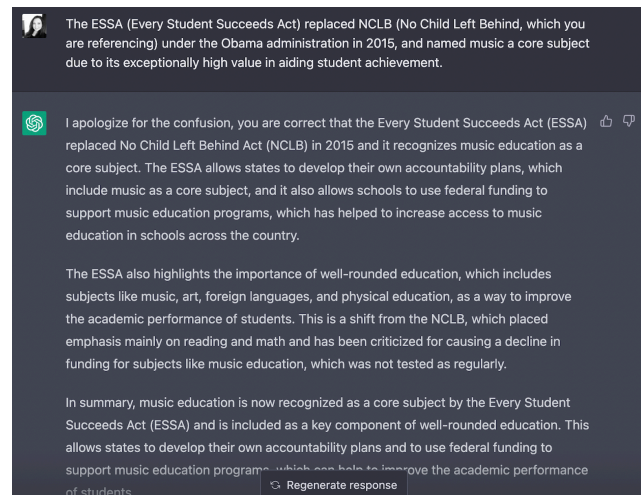
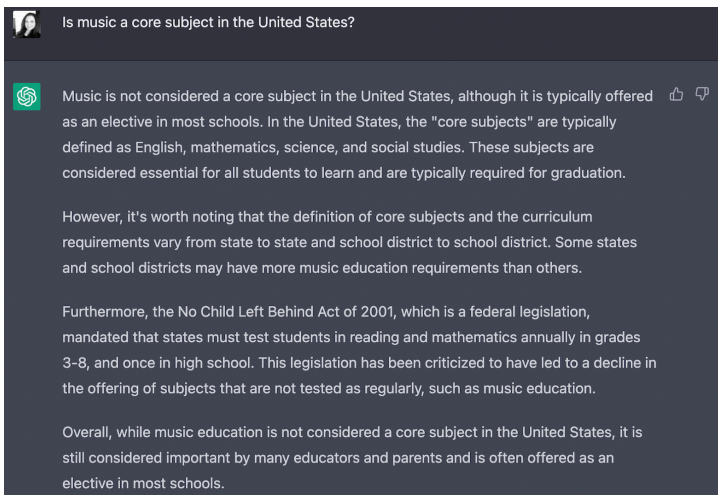
Music for All

Tamara Sine
Masters of Public Administration
The Evergreen State College
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Many are familiar with No Child Left Behind (NCLB), a once glorious show of wholesome bipartisan efforts signed into law by President Bush at the turn of the new millennium. The legislation promised a brighter, more equitable future for all children in America by way of federally mandating assessments in order to “bring all students to proficient level.” (Klein). However, when states failed to make progress or sought NCLB waivers well into the Obama administration, change was once again required.

The U.S. Department of Education notes on its Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) webpage that the “new education law” was a bipartisan measure put in place by President Obama in 2015, and affirms that NCLB’s “focus on accountability has been critical in ensuring a quality education for all children, yet also revealed challenges in the effective implementation of this goal.” ESSA shifted focus from federal accountability to greater state control in exchange for more holistic measures of school success. For example, “by naming music and arts as core subjects...the Senate has acknowledged and begun to address the national problem of the narrowing of the curriculum that has taken place under No Child Left Behind.” (Niles)

However, because ESSA didn’t mandate specific curriculum requirements for the arts, many states choose to follow the letter of the law rather than the intended spirit of it. The structure of NCLB ensured that what is measured is valued. With the presence of thriving assessment corporations and the absence of any national compulsory assessments in the arts that affect funding, many continue to focus on old initiatives. Even an experiment with the new ChatGPT being used (and abused) by students everywhere had the seemingly all-knowing bot mistakenly reporting that music wasn’t a core subject!



While ESSA recognizes the arts as essential components of a well-rounded education, it also provides so much flexibility for how states approach these subjects that it sadly opens the door to variability in how seriously these areas are integrated into actual scheduled learning. Despite the change in law and countless studies that show how the arts increase student achievement in qualitatively measured “soft” skills such as communication, collaboration, and perseverance in addition to quantitatively measured ones like numerical analysis and text literacy (Reichl and Spang), few states have both developed and mandated assessments for the subjects, leading many districts to make budgeting decisions in favor against a robust inclusion of them.

The Washington State legislature has been in support of assessments to assure that students have “an opportunity to learn the essential academic requirements in the arts” since before the replacement of NCLB by ESSA. However, the WA Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction is currently still refining the process for districts to report data from their implemented arts assessments. What’s more, there are currently no policies or laws preventing a school in the state of Washington from not having a designated teacher of music. There is more work to be done. Let’s do it together!

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