

Ticket sales or teacher's wallet? How St. Louis high schools fund theater

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Nancy Fowler



McCluer High School theater students rehearse "Man of La Mancha" at the Florissant Civic Center.

Carolina Hidalgo | St. Louis Public Radio

St. Louis schoolchildren in well-funded school districts often enjoy newer amenities like updated textbooks and newer technology. They may also have an advantage when it comes to the arts.

The disparity of resources is illustrated by theater departments at two local high schools. Clayton High School, whose students are mostly white, gets more help from the district and the community. In Florissant, predominantly African-American McCluer High School largely relies on the theater director, Doug Erwin, for funding.

"It comes from the Bank of Doug Erwin," he said. "I deduct a lot on my taxes."

St. Louis Public Radio's Nancy Fowler drops in on rehearsals for two local schools' musical productions to explore the role of funding in high school theater programs.

'Impossible dream'

At McCluer High School, that kind of confidence seems as elusive as "The Impossible Dream," the signature song from this year's musical, "Man of La Mancha." It's a play within a play about 17th-century novel "Don Quixote," set during the Spanish Inquisition.

McCluer is in the Ferguson-Florissant district, where 97 percent of students qualify for reduced-fare or free lunch. The district pays for performing rights and provides a few hundred dollars for costume and props. Student actors like Tony Merritt, who plays the lead role in "Man of La Mancha," knows selling popcorn and soliciting donations can make all the difference.

"It's definitely something that if we don't raise enough, we know there are certain things we can't get," Merritt said. "And sometimes that can be disappointing."

But when push comes to shove, the kids know they can count on theater director Erwin, who spends more than \$10,000 of his own money on the program every year. The kids make \$1,000 through fundraising, and ticket sales bring in another \$1,000, so when combined with what the district kicks in, the yearly total comes to about \$15,000 — close to what Clayton High School works with.

The difference is that most of it comes from Erwin, who makes a teacher's salary. Erwin, who has been at the school 15 years, has good reason to master the art of frugality.

"When we did 'Into the Woods,' we made what the kids referred to as 'Diva Trees,'" Erwin said. "We took branches and actually took lamé and sequined dresses that we got at Goodwill and then cut leaves out of them and then hot-glued them to the branches to make enchanted trees."

Not having their own theater in the school is also a challenge. McCluer's theater department stages its shows at the Florissant Civic Center, which takes 20 percent of ticket sales.

"Plus, I have to arrange transportation to get kids to the civic center. And if I arrange for a bus to do that, we have to pay for the bus, at \$25 an hour," Erwin said. "So that's something else the kids have to fundraise for."

The consequences would be dire, Erwin said, if he could no longer pay most of the expenses out of his own pocket.

"We would have to do a show with no props or costume," Erwin said. "Or have no program."

Why high school theater matters

High school theater is important because it provides numerous long-lasting benefits, according to Annamaria Pileggi, a Washington University drama professor who also works with high school students. She said skills honed through theater translate into other academic areas and even future careers.

"They become better at interpersonal communication, collaboration, discipline and critical thinking," Pileggi said. "And it's almost always done as an extracurricular, so they really have to learn good time-management skills."

Entering into a creative space such as a theater class can nurture a feeling of possibility, Pileggi said.

"I think it can give students who come from more challenging backgrounds an arena in which their creativity is not only encouraged, but nurtured and developed," she said. "It gives them a way to dream, to play, to — quite literally — hope."

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