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Editorial: Arts initiative will put Sacramento on the map

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It all began in May. The Sacramento Region Community Foundation brought in Michael Kaiser, president of the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts. He told arts organizations how they could survive and thrive during a troubled economy.

Mayor Kevin Johnson spoke briefly to the standing-room-only group. Kaiser and Johnson later met and hit it off.

Then the mayor in June launched a major arts initiative, "For Arts Sake." That effort has attracted 400 volunteers, meeting once a month, to spark an arts-and-culture revival.

Now comes a giant boost.

The Kennedy Center on Friday announced a nationwide initiative, called "Any Given Child," to ensure that young people have access to a complete, affordable arts education in music, dance, drama and visual art. Sacramento will be the launch city for this new arts partnership □ with the aim of bringing arts curricula to every Sacramento student from kindergarten through eighth grade.

As Kaiser has said, the arts "allow children to exercise their creativity in ways other subjects cannot."

But too often arts are taught in an "episodic manner" □ this year, but not the next.

The "Any Given Child" initiative provides an incredible opportunity to combine the resources of the schools, local arts groups and the Kennedy Center to get beyond this hodgepodge approach.

The first year will be an audit year, finding out what we have and what are we missing: What arts education already exists in the schools and what do arts organizations have to offer?

Students will see their new arts education in fall 2010. Arts organizations will be asked to specialize in a particular grade level and subject matter. For example, the Sacramento Ballet might work with one grade level, the B Street Theatre with another, the Crocker Art Museum with yet another.

So far, two of the city's school districts are participating □ Sacramento City Unified and Twin Rivers Unified. That promises to bring new arts education to more than 55,000 K-8 students.

Sharon Gerber, who is coordinating "For Art's Sake" for the mayor, describes art as the "soul of the community," an outlet for "creativity, exploration and discovery."

Whether it is a hand-stitched Hmong quilt telling a story, an improvisational jazz piece, a painting or a poem, art provides different ways for individuals to capture their experience of the world.

A child may not be good in other academic subjects such as English or math, but may excel in the arts. An immigrant child new to this country or a lower-income child with few books at home may find a talent, a passion and a link to the community through the arts.

While this big push for the arts has many authors, this is one area where the mayor himself has been able to use his office and his connections to bring people together around something positive.

Sacramento will be a better place for it.

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