Robinson: Young creatives not good for art education

--Mitchell Robinson is associate professor and chair of the music education area in the College of Music at Michigan State University.

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As a former public school music teacher, music teacher educator, arts education advocate and chair of the music education area at Michigan State University, I am writing to express my profound disappointment with the recent announcement from the Arts Council of Greater Lansing of the “Young Creatives Project,” an initiative designed to “support funding of teaching artists in Lansing School District elementary classrooms”. To be clear, “teaching artists” are not certified arts teachers, and are not licensed to provide instruction in schools.

I was deeply involved with the Arts Council’s early efforts to advocate for restoration of the nearly 20 music, art and physical education teaching positions eliminated by the district two years ago, and a central component of our community arts task force’s approach at the time was the recognition that it was the responsibility of the district to provide certified, qualified arts and physical education teachers to deliver instruction to Lansing’s children.

When the cuts were first announced, the Arts Council served as the “convener” of the Lansing area’s community arts providers and agencies, arts educators and other community organizations, and organized the local arts community in a forceful and principled response to the District’s actions. We understood that it was beyond the scope and mission of these organizations to provide sequential, curricular arts education to the children of Lansing, and that agreeing to consider this move would effectively relieve the District of its responsibility to provide instruction.

While the Arts Council’s new “Young Creatives Program” promises to partner with the LSD to provide “teaching artists” in the schools, this initiative will actually result in a greatly diminished arts education experience for Lansing’s children, and all but guarantee that the District will never reinstate art, music or physical education for the city’s youngest children. So while children in Holt, Grand Ledge and Waverly have faced similar budgetary challenges, but still offer and support strong, vibrant art, music and physical education offerings, their peers in Lansing will be deprived of these experiences. And the achievement gap between Lansing and other school systems will continue to grow wider.

If the Arts Council truly wants to do what is best for Lansing’s children, they will reconsider this shameless attempt to profit off of the LSD’s decision to eliminate elementary arts education in the city, and work with the District’s leadership to restore these programs to the schools. Lansing’s children deserve the same quality of education as their peers in other area schools, which includes music, art and physical education instruction delivered by certified, qualified teachers.

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