American educational reformer John Dewey famously said, “Education is not preparation for life; education is life itself.” And according to Boise State University associate professor of art education Kathleen Keys, life is about more than math and science.

“Imagine a world without the arts,” she said, responding to a question about the value of arts education in the K-12 system. “I think people forget everything is interconnected. They conceptualize art in museums and not as part of the fabric of everyday life, but it is an essential part of that fabric.”

Named the 2008 Art Educator of the Year by the Idaho Art Education Association, Keys has been involved in arts education in Idaho since 1999. In her research, she focuses on subjects that support the advancement of arts-based learning, from community education to teacher training. While she is a proponent of integrating the arts into other subject matter, Keys hopes students, teachers, parents and policymakers grasp their significance in and beyond the classroom.

“Our [K-12] education system is really set up for capitalist preparation,” Keys said. “We’re more worried about people getting jobs and following the rules than fully and critically educating the citizenry, getting people to think deeply.”

Artistic disciplines from music to theater to language are offered as electives in Idaho schools, but all fall into a single “humanities” category. From grades 9-12, only two humanities credits are required, and while standards apply, Keys said they are extremely broad and not formally assessed.

“When I teach people who are going to become art teachers, I teach above the standards,” she said. “Cognitive specialists have suggested that access to the arts is important for childhood development — intellectually, emotionally and socially. It teaches young people to engage with, make, react to and criticize art, to look at aesthetics and understand the visual language.”

One of the people working to update Idaho standards is Peggy Wenner, arts and humanities coordinator for the State Department of Education. A former teacher of literature and interdisciplinary humanities with bachelor’s degrees in music and English and a Ph.D. in British literature, Wenner shares Keys’ views on the relevance of arts education. Even so, she said, budget, schedule and curriculum constraints mean it is a small fraction of the academic “core.”

“The imbalance is not just in our schools; it’s everywhere in our world. It’s a reality,” Wenner said. “I do feel I’m working in a supportive environment here at the state department, which is dedicated to keeping the arts supported through these tough times.”
Wenner said retooled standards will align with Partnership for 21st Century Skills, a nationwide advocacy organization dedicated to infusing education with creativity, collaboration, critical thinking and global awareness, among other modern values.

“They already are evident in arts education. We don’t need to justify its existence as much as other subjects need to learn from the way it teaches,” Wenner said.

“Art is not a handmaiden,” Keys echoed, paraphrasing iconic arts educator Elliot Eisner. “What we teach young people needs to reflect what we as adults feel is important about the world.”