

## **Access to Arts and Culture Through the Programme “Latvian School Bag”: Investment in the Future of Each Child and the Whole of Society**

*“There are no people who do not consume culture and art at all. This is the way our brain works: people cannot exist without art and culture. Another thing is that people may fail to notice that culture is all around them. Similarly, we do not notice that we breathe air until someone puts a plastic bag over our head!”*

*/Rūta Muktupāvela, Professor, Rector of the Latvian Academy of Culture/*

The essence of the arts and culture education programme “Latvian School Bag” (“Latvijas skolas soma”) can be described with three key words: everyone, regularity, diversity. “Latvian School Bag” is a state-funded programme that provides an opportunity for each school-age child in Latvia from the 1<sup>st</sup> grade to the last grade of the secondary education to experience high-quality professional arts and culture events regularly. At least once per semester young people encounter diverse classical and contemporary cultural products, as well as familiarize themselves with cultural heritage values. These events are part of the education process, and the content of the programme is tied together with the school curriculum. During more than five years in operation we are happy to share our story and lessons learned and we do it answering to three questions: Why, How and So What?

Access to culture for children and young people transcends entertainment although quality cultural entertainment is also needed; culture becomes a key element for their holistic development, shaping individuals who are not only knowledgeable but also culturally aware, sensitive, and adaptable to the challenges of an interconnected world. Exposure to cultural activities, such as literature, art, music, and theatre, can stimulate cognitive development, enhance their critical thinking skills, creativity, and ability to understand complex concepts, explore and understand a wide range of emotions, perspectives, and social situations.

Cultural activities can also aid in the development of a child's sense of identity and belonging. Exposure to diverse cultural expressions allows children to explore their own cultural background, fostering a sense of pride and connection to their heritage.

Preparation to the Centenary Celebration of Latvia's statehood (2018) was used as a momentum to address a long-desired goal and initiate a new project – “Latvian School Bag”. A survey conducted in Latvia in 2016 revealed that barriers for students to attend the cultural events are very trivial, due to mostly financial reasons. In more than 80% of the cases the ticket prices were standing between a child and a cultural experience, and in more than 60% of the cases, transportation costs were the problem, since easy access to professional art and culture is a privilege of large cities, leaving rural areas with very limited professional cultural offer (or even none).

To respond to this situation, after two semesters of pilot projects in different municipalities, an impressive nation-wide project started operations in September 2018. Legislation and normative acts were developed for project administration and funding. From the state budget available, an amount was distributed proportionally according to the number of students in each municipality, private and vocational school. Almost

6000 teenagers representing all municipalities were invited to Riga to the impressive opening event in the largest sports arena in Latvia. They returned home as ambassadors of the new programme, eager to share with their friends the experience of encountering the diverse forms of arts and culture they experienced. Since then, the programme has become an integral part of the school activities. On average more than 14 000 cultural events are provided every year including mobile productions invited by the schools, and more than 230 000 or 98% of students from the 1<sup>st</sup> grade up to the secondary school benefit from it.

An important principle of the “Latvian school bag” is building meaningful connection among education and culture. Seeing culture as part of the learning process is particularly important, so a diverse array of activities in 10 different cultural sectors covering best examples of the visual art, music, theatre, circus, literature, dance, design, cinema, architecture and cultural heritage.

The programme is funded from the state budget annually, and the finances are distributed directly to the municipalities and private entities carrying out the educational programmes in their schools proportionally to the number of enrolled students during the reference year. A network of programme coordinators works all over the country providing administrative and methodological support for the teachers who are the programme’s promoters for their students. The programme undergoes monitoring and evaluation regularly to improve its effectiveness.

Over the years the newly established programme has had to face unforeseen difficulties presented by the Covid-19 pandemic, administratively territorial reform, Russia’s war against Ukraine etc. The “Latvian School Bag” programme was able to respond to that instantly, as much as possible moving the content to digital platforms and offering topics where complicated issues were spoken about through artistic language.

The aim of the programme has stayed the same throughout the first five years of operations – to ensure that every school-age child could experience and enjoy values and contemporary expressions of Latvian culture and art. Aspirations and the goal is to ensure that over the 12 years, from the 1<sup>st</sup> grade to last grade of secondary education, every student has become a knowledgeable, interested consumer of high quality culture as each of them has had an opportunity to experience all these forms of cultural expression. We believe that access to cultural experiences that encourage both individual freedom and the interests of the community and environment are crucial. In many cases they serve as the trigger to create critical discussions among the students. Their feedback is welcomed and moderated by the teacher who makes sure that the students go beyond emotional judgement and reach an intellectual level – recognizing and analysing the intentions and message of an art piece of any form.

The programme has started impacting the cultural sector as well. The scope and diversity of arts and cultural events for children and young people has been gradually growing, since the programme serves both as a platform and driving force for the professionals to create for the young audiences. Children and youth are seen as an important future audience. The possibility to receive targeted funding from the State Cultural Capital Foundation’s facilitated open competitions is an enabling factor, too.

*“These are performances with whom we tour to schools and play in classrooms and auditoriums. Communication with the audience is very direct, everything is open. Those are the moments when I understand why I do this work. The awareness that, by*

*playing a play, I can positively influence the audience, change their thinking. When I am in contact with young people, I feel it very vividly. After the performance they come up and say: “Thank you, I was thinking about that, I needed it right now,” and you realize that you have encouraged someone with your message.”*

*/Oskars Florencs-Vīksne, young actor/*

Access to culture is not only enriching, but also vital for the development of the individual and society, as it can serve as a bridge between generations, connecting the wisdom of the past with the aspirations of the future. It helps to raise awareness in society about the very special role culture plays in personality development and wellbeing, and how it contributes to building up a happier, safer, and more sustainable future both locally and globally.

**More information:**

<https://www.latvijasskolassoma.lv>

<https://www.facebook.com/latvijasskolassoma>

<https://www.instagram.com/latvijasskolassoma/>

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/latvijasskolassoma/>

<https://www.youtube.com/@latvijasskolassoma>

**Video from the opening event of the programme:**

<https://youtu.be/64xX8chZjCQ>

**Videos about the structure and principles of the programme:**

(3min)

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a935s6YuSuA&ab\\_channel=Latvijasskolassoma](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a935s6YuSuA&ab_channel=Latvijasskolassoma)

(12min)

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nxl4ONPbfPg&ab\\_channel=Latvijasskolassoma](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nxl4ONPbfPg&ab_channel=Latvijasskolassoma)

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