



Conference Background Paper June 2009

The Situation

Arts education in the nation's schools is clearly in a state of decline. For many communities, the slide started with significant public budget shortfalls in the 1970s and 1980s that led school districts to drastically cut programs not deemed central to the academic mission. More recently, the emphasis on standardized testing to assess progress in “core” subjects like reading and math appears to have had the unintended consequence of shrinking class time for other subjects.¹ Research has found a strong correlation between childhood arts education and adult participation in the arts.² Therefore, more widespread and better arts education for young people could result in more Americans taking part in the arts, bringing multiple benefits to both them and their communities – ranging from individual pleasure and satisfaction to the strengthening of local economies.³

Common goals

Despite pockets of good arts education, according to a Wallace-commissioned study from the RAND Corporation, *Revitalizing Arts Education Through Community-Wide Coordination*,⁴ “most children receive only a smattering of arts instruction, and some receive none at all.”⁵ Nonetheless, several communities appear to be making headway in reversing the longstanding erosion of arts education. What are the aims of these sites?

- Bringing arts education to more children (**access**);
- Making its distribution more equitable (**equity**);
- Elevating the quality of arts instruction (**quality**).

The Approach: Coordination

It's unlikely that public schools – on their own – will be able to reverse the decline in K-12 arts education anytime soon. So it is not surprising that new approaches to expanding access to and the quality of arts learning have been taking root in a number of cities and counties. They are based on the idea that while schools are the place where children are likeliest to get arts education, other community institutions have much to contribute as well. This pooling of resources can happen when schools, arts organizations,

¹ Susan J. Bodilly, Catherine H. Augustine, Laura Zakaras, *Revitalizing Arts Education Through Community-Wide Coordination*, RAND Corporation, 2008. Available at www.wallacefoundation.org or www.rand.org.

² See: Laura Zakaras, Julia F. Lowell, *Cultivating Demand for the Arts: Arts Learning, Arts Engagement, and State Arts Policy*, RAND Corporation, June 2008, 18-19. Available at www.wallacefoundation.org or www.rand.org.

³ See in part Kevin F. McCarthy et. al., *Gifts of the Muse: Reframing the Debate About the Benefits of the Arts*, RAND Corporation, 2005, 37-51. Available at www.wallacefoundation.org or www.rand.org.

⁴ Bodilly, et. al., *Revitalizing Arts Education Through Community-Wide Coordination*

⁵ Ibid, xii.

community-based organizations, government agencies, funders and others join together to improve arts learning opportunities for all children. Effective coordinated approaches typically include committed public and private leadership, a set of shared goals and clear outcomes, a feasible plan based on data and progress benchmarks, and clear, consistent communication to develop and sustain public support. According to RAND, “cities and counties in which there are efforts to coordinate providers and influencers in order to improve access to arts education appear to be making headway against the long-standing devaluing of arts education in the public schools.”

The working hypothesis underlying the coordinated approach to improving arts learning is:

- (1) *If schools, cultural and other community institutions work in a more coordinated fashion and identify and overcome obstacles to improving public school arts instruction,*
- (2) *then cities can provide more children with high-quality arts learning opportunities on a sustained and equitable basis.*

Challenges

But RAND also noted that these efforts are often vulnerable to policy and political changes. As the RAND researchers put it, “a coordination effort that is poorly situated within the community, narrow in its recognition of assets or partners, or planted within an organization subject to overnight policy shifts can be quite fragile.”

Communities face enormous obstacles to making progress on access, equity and quality. The task of bringing arts instruction to more children (**access**) entails such strategies as creating a large enough corps of arts-knowledgeable administrators, classroom teachers and teaching artists to bring arts instruction “to scale” despite tightened school budgets and a number of other constraints. One notable challenge is that a whole generation of teachers and principals was educated in the 1970s and 1980s, the period when large cuts in arts instruction began, so broad swaths of educators today are unfamiliar with arts education and what it has to offer.

Making sure that arts instruction reaches a broad segment of city children (**equity**) also means confronting what the RAND study describes as “idiosyncratic and unreliable” arts education offerings. Whether children receive arts instruction hinges on factors ranging from the school they attend, to their access to transportation, to the funding their out-of-school time programs receive.⁶ For example in Dallas, a 1997 study estimated that only about one-quarter of that city’s students benefited from cultural programming, and affluent children generally had multiple arts experiences while others had few or none.⁷

Finally, improving **quality** – that is, ensuring that arts experiences are more consistently rigorous and engaging – presents its own unique challenges. It is notable that although national arts standards were created in the mid-1990s and have since been adopted by most of the 50 states, they have rarely been embraced in classrooms. And assessing how well these standards are met is rarer still.

In the face of these challenges, many collaboratives and their funders recognize an opportunity. Supporting the efforts of local coordinated arts learning initiatives to build on early successes to make meaningful progress in improving arts education – that is, providing arts instruction to more children, making its distribution more equitable and raising its quality—is a vehicle both for helping children and developing lessons that could inform other cities engaged in similar work.

⁶ Ibid, p. 23.

⁷ *A Wallace Story from the Field about the Dallas Arts Learning Initiative*, The Wallace Foundation, 2008, p. 5, available at www.wallacefoundation.org.

Desired outcomes

What are the measures of the success of arts learning improvement efforts?

1. More children would be learning about the arts (**access**);
2. Arts education would be more equitably distributed (**equity**);
3. More children would be receiving high-quality arts instruction (**quality**).

If improvement efforts are to be sustained over time, then the institutions involved must change so that:

1. schools and other arts educators provide arts instruction to more children and institute ongoing practices to raise the quality of arts instruction;
2. policies of public and private institutions promote the goals of more and better arts instruction, equitably distributed;
3. key actors in the coordinated efforts take full responsibility for their roles in advancing arts education.

Conclusion

Because of the challenges of this work, we think that efforts to share lessons – such as this conference – are especially important. By understanding, through candid discussion, both the successes and challenges of coordinated approaches to improving access, equity and quality, those leading these city-based efforts are more likely to succeed. And, as the RAND study suggests, we think coordinated efforts are a promising approach to giving more children opportunities to engage in high-quality arts learning experiences.