

AMERICAN ACADEMY  
OF ARTS & SCIENCES

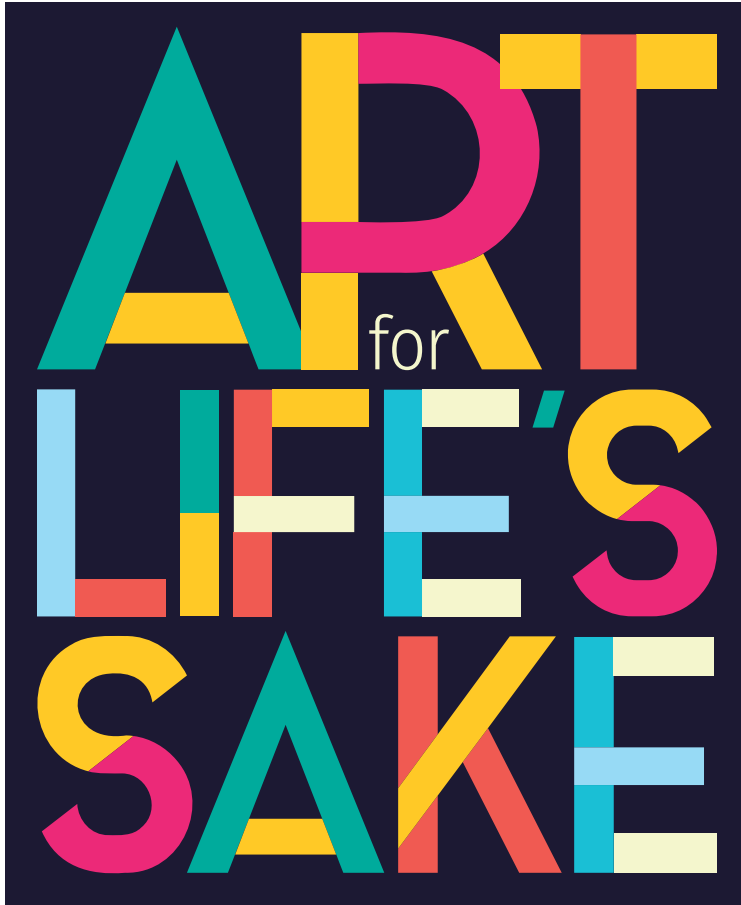
ART  
for  
LIFE'S  
SAKE

The Case for Arts Education

A REPORT OF THE COMMISSION ON THE ARTS

**ARTS** education was already in a state of crisis and dire need before the fraught year of 2020, and the pandemic has intensified that crisis exponentially. We regard our report as a celebration of the arts, a gesture of optimism, and, above all, a call to action.

A REPORT OF THE COMMISSION ON THE ARTS



# The Case for Arts Education

AMERICAN ACADEMY OF ARTS & SCIENCES  
Cambridge, Massachusetts

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Revised and accepted by the members of the Commission on the Arts

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# A LETTER

# FROM THE PRESIDENT

# OF THE AMERICAN ACADEMY

“This report offers a clarion call to parents, teachers, and governments at the national, state, and local level to recognize the vital role arts education plays in developing empathetic, well-rounded, and civically engaged individuals who are prepared to be active members of their communities and participants in our democracy.”

—DAVID W. OXTOBY

**T**he arts are facing a grave threat as this report goes to press. As the report shows, arts education was sorely underresourced even before the pandemic arrived, and that was before educators had to deliver their work through computer screens—a poor substitute for the group and student-teacher dynamics that are so essential to an arts education. And as we look to the future, the devastating financial effects from the pandemic threaten the local and state funding streams that underwrite classes in the subject. The Commission on the Arts was established in the fall of 2018 to address the first issue, but the events of the past year underscore the precarious nature of arts education in our nation’s schools. This report offers a clarion call to parents, teachers, and governments at the national, state, and local level to recognize the vital role arts education plays in developing empathetic, well-rounded, and civically engaged individuals who are prepared to be active members of their communities and participants in our democracy.

Although the arts are an integral part of the membership of the Academy, this is the first Commission and the first report to directly address their interests and concerns. The Commission is led by three indefatigable cochairs—John Lithgow, Deborah Rutter, and Natasha Trethewey—and the arts education work of the Commission has been developed and overseen by a working group chaired by Rod Bigelow and Roberta Uno and comprised of Louise Bryson, Paula Giddings, Olivia Gude, Vicky Holt Takamine, Brian Kisida, and Angela LaPorte.

This report reflects the invaluable efforts of two Commission members in particular, Brian Kisida and Angela LaPorte, who prepared the initial draft with assistance from members of the Academy staff. Their draft was then reviewed and revised, following a series of roundtable discussions with leaders and advocates in the field, by the cochairs and members of the Commission. We are deeply grateful for all their efforts.

Virtual listening sessions with educators, artists, administrators, organizational leaders, scholars and researchers, parents, and students were essential to the report's development. Alongside those conversations, we gained crucial perspectives from the personal reflections we received in response to a public call for stories about the impact of arts education. We thank all who shared with us or aided in this effort. Your stories inspired us and further affirmed the need for equitable, high-quality arts education in every student's life.

We also owe our thanks to the funders who have made the work of the Commission possible: the Barr Foundation, the Ford Foundation, the Getty Foundation, the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, the Kresge Foundation, and Roger and Victoria Sant. Thanks also go to the members of the Academy staff who served this Commission and shepherded this report to publication: Allentza Michel, Mary Lyons, Tania Munz, Jessica Taylor, Robert Townsend, Paul Erickson, Gabriela Farrell, Phyllis Bendell, Peter Walton, Heather Struntz, and Scott Raymond.

Sincerely,

**David W. Oxtoby**

*President, American Academy of Arts and Sciences*



# THE ARTS AND

# PUBLIC EDUCATION

“As democracy depends on civil society . . . so civil society depends on the arts . . . democracy ultimately rests on the arts’ commitment to free creativity, liberal diversity, and unfettered imagination. A government that supports the arts and humanities is not engaging in philanthropic activity but assuring the conditions of its own flourishing.”

—BENJAMIN BARBER

## Introduction

By any measure, the arts should stand at the heart of a strong public education. An education without the arts—a fundamental mode of human expression—is incomplete. But the value of arts education is deeper. The arts are a rich source of history and cultural identity. Learning from the voices of different cultures and histories provides the opportunity to reflect on the complexity of human experience across time and place.

The arts give us opportunities to contemplate meaning and engage in personal reflection and provide comfort in times of crisis. The arts can challenge our perspectives, giving us new ways to see and experience the world, cultivating the values of diversity, tolerance, and empathy.<sup>1</sup> The arts impart valuable cognitive, critical thinking, and technical skills used by artists and non-artists in their livelihoods, strengthening our economy.<sup>2</sup> The arts strengthen social ties in our schools and communities and enhance civic

engagement, strengthening civil society.<sup>3</sup> Finally, the arts enhance educational engagement and a desire to learn more. Childhood exposure to the arts inculcates a lifelong desire to engage in the arts. In sum, arts education is central to the core mission of public education—to equip a citizenry for self-government—and recognition of this fact is long overdue.

Sadly, the education system often fails to hold arts education in high esteem. Faced with budget constraints and rising accountability pressures, policy-makers and administrators have to make difficult decisions about the availability of the arts in schools. As a result, access to arts education has declined. In some cases, it is treated as a complement to other subjects, an elective, or a frill. In other cases, it has been eliminated entirely.<sup>4</sup> And the reliance on property taxes to fund school districts creates an uneven distribution of funding between wealthy and

underresourced neighborhoods that exacerbates racial disparities in student access to an arts education.

These reductions and inequities fit against a backdrop of other troubling trends with serious implications for our democracy and national well-being. Nationally, we are more divided than ever. We have recently witnessed the legitimacy of our system of government weakened, the value of our free press undermined, and intolerant views emboldened. Crimes motivated by racial and religious bigotry are occurring at heightened levels, and the number of hate groups in the United States has been steadily increasing.<sup>5</sup> Against this backdrop, our youth are suffering. Mass school shootings have become commonplace. Adolescent depression

and anxiety have been steadily rising, and suicide rates among young people are at a twenty-year high.<sup>6</sup>

In the midst of these education crises, the world has been challenged by the COVID-19 global pandemic, which has drastically changed the lives of students and families across the world, exposing them to illness, job loss, housing displacement, and the devastating loss of friends and family. The strain on school budgets due to the economic challenges of the pandemic response has also negatively impacted arts education, including cuts to arts programs.<sup>7</sup> These impacts have disproportionately affected Black, Indigenous, and Latinx communities, and proximity to this tragedy has dire effects on the mental health of children and youth.<sup>8</sup>



“As a dancer and as an artist, I’m forever a student, and I have so many incredible teachers that have influenced me and gotten me to where I am today. Growing up the way that I did—in underprivileged communities, one of six children in a single-parent home, changing schools constantly—I was twelve-and-a-half years old the first time I had a teacher that made me feel seen and heard and not judged. . . . It was the first time that I really decided I was going to go for something outside of my comfort zone, and it was the first time I was venturing into performing and dancing. It was the only thing that allowed me to feel like I was really expressing myself in a way I was com-

fortable. . . . Dance allowed me to develop as a person and as a human being. . . . [Without my dance teacher] I wouldn’t be—not just what people see: the first Black principal ballerina at American Ballet Theater—but I wouldn’t be the woman that I am today, and I think that’s what’s so incredible and important about arts in public schools in particular and dance as an art form in public schools. . . . I am forever grateful for that opportunity.”

–MISTY COPELAND, PRINCIPAL BALLERINA AT AMERICAN BALLET THEATER

One would be hard pressed to look at America in 2021 and not acknowledge the crisis in the health of our democracy, our social lives, our collective mental health, and our ability to interact peacefully and civilly. John Dewey argued that schools were the key to creating citizens who could maintain a democracy.<sup>9</sup> If the fundamental measure of a quality education is the health of our democracy, recent events suggest we are falling short of the ideal.

Although not nearly enough data are available in this area, evidence shows that arts education can play a vital part in the solution. We have all witnessed the powerful roles the arts play in people's lives—as a means to cope with loss, discover a sense of meaning and belonging, and as a way to experience joy. We have also seen how the arts move us to empathize

with others, challenge us with different points of view, and play a unifying role in social movements. Take the devastating effects of the pandemic on the well-being of children as an example: As we look toward the long process of recovery, we can be confident that arts education will facilitate emotional well-being, reconnects students with friends and teachers, and foster resiliency.<sup>10</sup>

For all Americans to reap the full benefits of the arts, we need to ensure that access to arts education is not merely a privilege enjoyed by some but a right guaranteed to all. This report builds on past research linking the arts and arts learning to social and emotional development, while also trying to push past old and obsolete notions. One example is the use of the term *tolerance*. Terminology that is more

“When I was fourteen years old, I was going through a rough patch. I was abusing drugs and alcohol, and it wasn't looking good. Luckily, I met a teacher that would change my life. . . . She was a theater teacher at my school. . . . Through her joy and her passion for theater, she was able to find deep reservoirs of creativity inside me and inspired me to get the hell out of my rut that I was in—my death spiral—and just have fun. And it doesn't sound important when I say it, you say, 'Fun? You could just go out and play stickball in the street, go ride a bike.' It's not the same kind of fun: theater fun is like a communicative fun, it's a healing kind of fun, it's a joy. And by the way, I learned more in that theater class than I did in any of my other studies—English, mathematics. . . . My brain grew twelve sizes thanks to theater, and not only that, it built confidence and muscles in my soul. I can clearly chart a path on my life's journey through the theatrical productions I was a part of and my theater teachers—God bless them all. I'm a firm believer that every school in this country should have a theater arts program. It saved my life, and I love it.”

—JACK BLACK, ACTOR AND MUSICIAN



culturally responsive and centered on equity, such as *acceptance*, will be more useful for an increasingly diverse nation where only understanding and acceptance can bring people together effectively. If arts education is to serve all students, it needs to be situated within our present need for social justice.

To make the case for the importance of arts education, we first review some of the research on the benefits of arts education while highlighting current inequities in access. Then (in *The Values of Arts Education*) we offer a more expansive frame for articulating the benefits of arts education, drawing on personal examples from a few of the many people who shared their stories with us. Finally (in *Policy Recommendations*), we lay out a comprehensive set of tangible policy recommendations that can bring us closer to our goal of ensuring every student in the United States has access to a quality arts education.

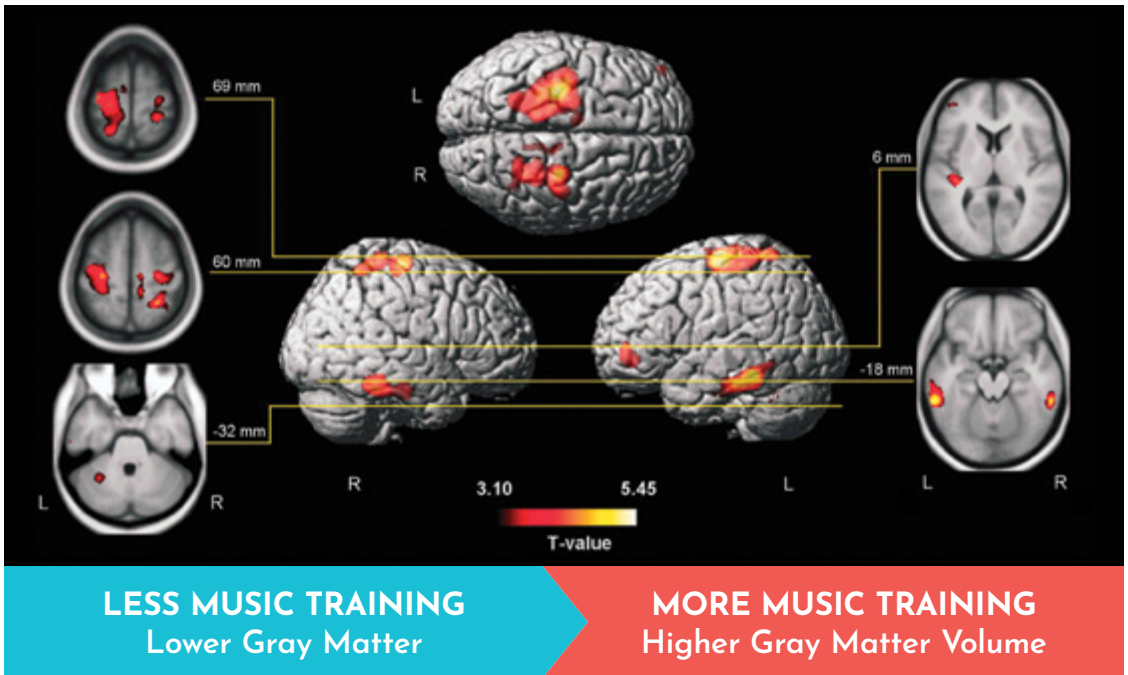
### Prior Research on the Benefits of Arts Education

Educational theorists and practitioners have articulated a variety of potential benefits for the arts. Most broadly, some note that the arts are a way of imparting the rich history of the human experience. As some scholars have put it, “the arts are a fundamentally important part of culture, and an education without them is an impoverished education leading to an impoverished society.”<sup>11</sup> Some note that arts education is particularly beneficial because it helps develop self-expression and creativity or because it enhances cognitive and critical thinking skills.<sup>12</sup> Others argue that the arts learning process builds qualities in students that are essential for a democracy.<sup>13</sup>

Emerging empirical research testing such theories sheds new light on some of the measurable benefits of the arts. Early correlational studies identified relationships between the arts and other academic outcomes, such as improved test scores and higher graduation rates.<sup>14</sup> Some scholars and stakeholders have resisted framing the benefits of the arts this way, however, and have questioned the validity of research that does not demonstrate causal relationships.<sup>15</sup> More recent studies have approached the topic with increased rigor and a broader focus on the types of benefits gained from arts education. One pioneering study of a school-museum partnership program demonstrated a causal link between arts education and critical thinking outcomes,<sup>16</sup> increased tolerance, increased empathy,<sup>17</sup> and higher motivation to engage with arts and culture.<sup>18</sup> More recent rigorous studies have found improvements in students’ standardized writing scores, reductions in disciplinary infractions, increases in students’ compassion for others, increased school engagement, improved attendance, and higher college aspirations.<sup>19</sup> Growing research about music’s impact on brain development offers another insight into the importance of a robust arts curriculum for every student. Researchers investigating neuroplasticity and music have uncovered links in musicians’ brains to stronger language development and comprehension, as well as memory and attention.<sup>20</sup> Studies have also shown that musical training correlates with increased gray matter in specific regions of the brain.<sup>21</sup>

While the research demonstrates a range of benefits from arts education, it also points to the social justice challenge in this area. A consistent finding accompanying much of the research on arts education is that students from historically marginalized backgrounds tend to experience greater benefits from arts

## The Brain on Music



**SOURCE:** Christian Gaser and Gottfried Schlaug, “Brain Structures Differ between Musicians and Non-Musicians,” *Journal of Neuroscience* 23 (27) (2003): 9240–9245, <https://doi.org/10.1523/JNEUROSCI.23-27-09240.2003>.

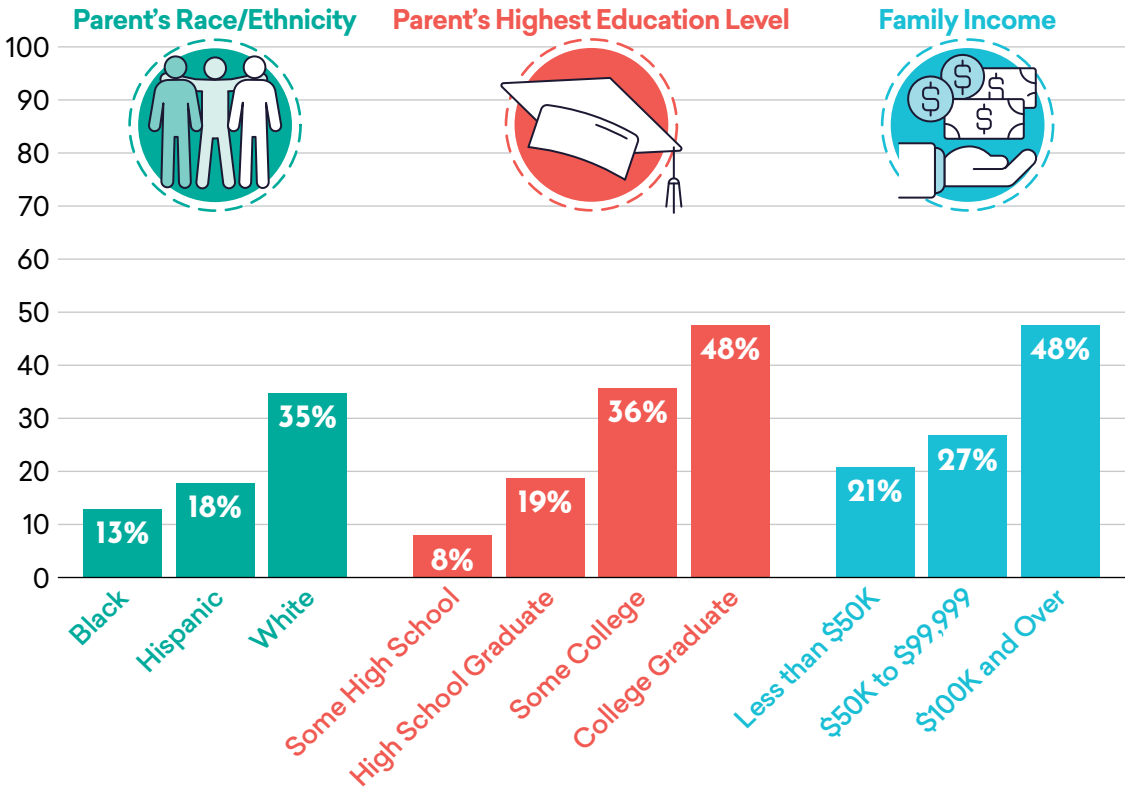
education facilitated by schools, likely because they are more dependent on schools to provide essential arts education experiences.<sup>22</sup> As a result, they are the most likely to experience negative effects when arts funding is cut or inequitable.

### Access and Gaps in Arts Education

The American public overwhelmingly supports arts education, with 88 percent agreeing that the arts are an essential component of a well-rounded education.<sup>23</sup> Yet despite this broad public support, a range of indicators document a persistent decline in access. The National Endowment for the Arts’ Survey of Public Participation in the Arts

(SPPA) found that after a steady trend of increased arts education in the twentieth century, access to arts education has been declining for the past three decades.<sup>24</sup> Many attribute schools’ decreased emphasis on the arts to the increased focus on subjects measured for test-based accountability.<sup>25</sup> In one national survey, more than half of educators reported the arts were receiving less instructional time and resources. Only 12 and 10 percent reported similar declines in English and math instruction, respectively.<sup>26</sup> These declines have lasting repercussions that may affect generations. The SPPA has found that arts education during childhood is the strongest predictor of arts participation as an adult. Adults who received arts education as children are twice as likely to engage with the arts compared to those who did not.<sup>27</sup> If people are to reap the full benefits

Figure 1: Share of Parents Reporting Their Child Was Taught Art or Music outside School, 2012



**SOURCE:** National Endowment for the Arts, 2012 Survey of Public Participation in the Arts.

of a lifelong engagement in the arts, an introduction during childhood is key.

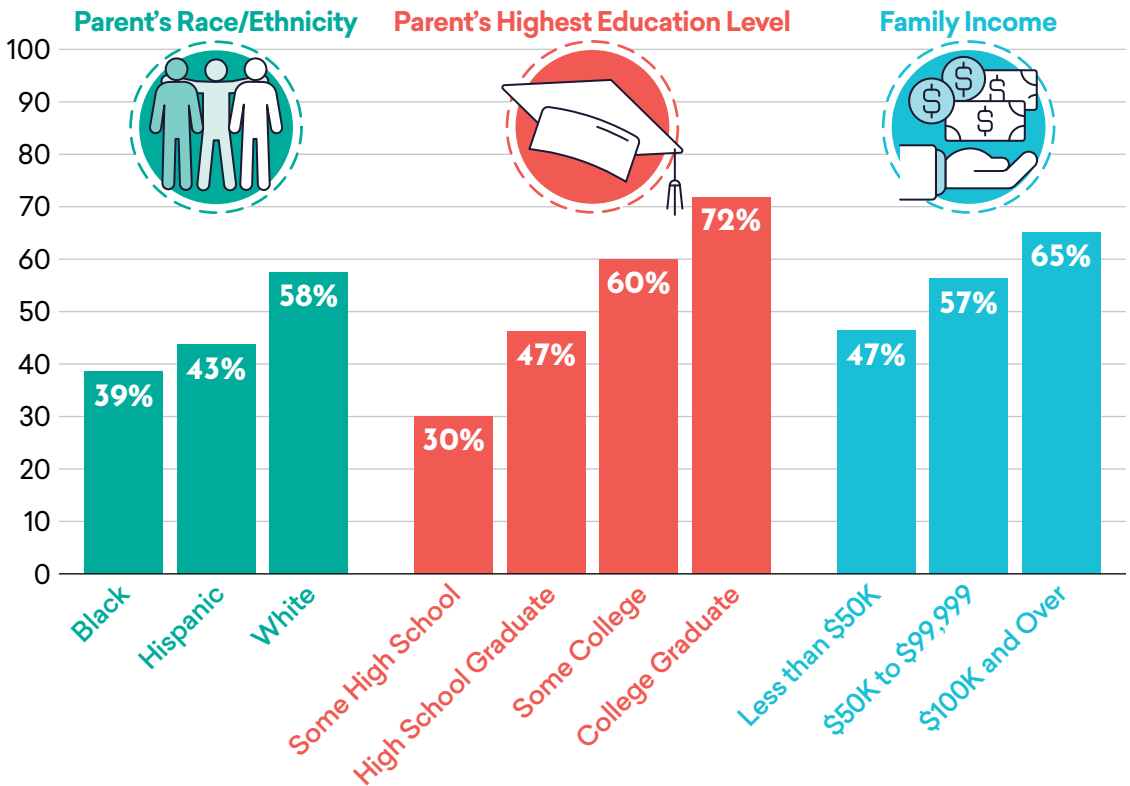
Most troubling, declines in arts education reflect the persistent inequities endemic to our educational system. Students in high-needs schools and historically underserved populations have been hit the hardest. This is especially troubling and bitterly ironic, as the same students experiencing declines are those who rely most on public schools to provide enriching arts experiences. More affluent families are twice as likely to provide such experiences for their children outside the school system.<sup>28</sup> As a result, families with fewer resources are

much less likely to have arts experiences if schools fail to provide them.<sup>29</sup>

Consider the evidence:

- According to a federal government report, teachers at schools designated as needing improvement and schools with higher percentages of minority students were more likely to experience decreases in time spent on arts education.<sup>30</sup>
- The SPPA reports that white students are nearly twice as likely as African American and Hispanic students to have received arts

Figure 2: Share of 18- to 24-Year-Olds Reporting Any Arts Education in School, 2012



**SOURCE:** National Endowment for the Arts, 2012 Survey of Public Participation in the Arts.

education.<sup>31</sup> And children whose parents have at least a college degree are six times more likely to have had arts education compared to children whose parents have less than a high school education.<sup>32</sup>

- Though white students have experienced virtually no declines in arts education since the mid-1980s, African American students have experienced reductions in arts education of 49 percent, and Hispanic/Latinx students have experienced reductions of 40 percent. Children whose parents have less than a high school education have experienced a 77 percent decline since 1982.<sup>33</sup>

- Numerous local audits have found that schools serving low-income students often provide no arts education or lack an arts teacher. In New York City, for example, where spending on arts supplies and equipment dropped by 84 percent from 2006 to 2013, more than 42 percent of schools in low-income areas did not have a state-certified arts teacher.<sup>34</sup>

The impact of the pandemic will likely widen these gaps, as schools with fewer resources and higher needs will face increased resource constraints. Without appropriate action from education policy-makers, our most vulnerable



## 83% OF AMERICANS FAVOR FUNDING FOR ARTS EDUCATION

**SOURCE:** Americans for the Arts, *Americans Speak Out about the Arts in 2018*.

students are likely to fall even further behind. Policy-makers will rightly focus on learning losses in core content areas, such as reading and math, as America's children return to some sense of normalcy. But to focus on other subjects at the expense of the arts would be

misguided. At a time when students are recovering from the trauma and anxiety of not only the pandemic but the breakdown and failing of many of our institutions, the social and emotional benefits of arts education are more important than ever.



“To speak about music for me is, of course, to speak about my life, my childhood—that moment when I first encountered the music. Music is more than entertainment, it’s about values. When you play in an orchestra, when you sing in a choir, talking about music and interacting together, you are developing an idea not just as an individual, but also as a team. And having the opportunity to go on a journey with one another, where the music teaches you

the values of sharing with others, about creating harmony together, this is the most important thing. . . . That first moment, playing in an orchestra and swimming inside this ocean of sound and beauty, interacting with others, for me that was the key moment. I think it’s very important for new generations to have the opportunity to live a life in beauty, in inspiration, in teamwork. And this is what music is about: art as an element of social transformation.”

–GUSTAVO DUDAMEL, MUSICAL AND ARTISTIC DIRECTOR OF THE LOS ANGELES PHILHARMONIC



## Now Is Our Moment

The problems facing America's youth are dire and need to be approached with a sense of urgency. If public education has an original purpose, it is to equip a citizenry capable of self-government for the survival of our republic. Over time, our shared vision of what constitutes a well-rounded education has expanded to include additional goals, ranging from workforce skills to social and emotional development. Underlying all these

goals is the hope that expanding educational opportunities will enable Americans to add their voices to our shared society and that we as a people will be stronger for it. The goals of public education are predicated on our common purpose to generate effective citizens who are emotionally secure, socially empowered, and civically engaged. To fully achieve these goals, we must reclaim our shared vision of a well-rounded education and chart a different course. Arts education is a right that should be available to every child in America.

## Arts Education in Our Schools and Communities

The arts education landscape consists of a robust network of public, not-for-profit, and private education providers.<sup>35</sup> Central to this network are frontline arts educators in schools who reach more than 56 million students every day (90 percent of whom attend public schools).<sup>36</sup> The scale of the public education system makes it fundamental in strengthening the equitable delivery of arts education. Other essential components include cultural institutions, such as museums and performing arts centers, cultural heritage groups, master artists and craftspeople, teaching artists, community-based arts organizations, churches, social and civic clubs, libraries, and other arts providers.

Arts education is delivered through a variety of formats. At the elementary level, most students receive some form of general arts education, typically through visual arts and/or music from a certified

arts specialist or classroom teacher. In middle and high school, students typically receive arts education through required courses and electives, including visual, performing, music, literary, and media arts. In addition to stand-alone arts classes, some schools integrate the arts with other subjects. Nonprofit cultural institutions and community organizations offer field trips, in-school visits and performances, teaching artists, and out-of-school programs. Some of these nonprofits, supported by philanthropy and other forms of fundraising, provide services for free or at reduced cost to students. But others are self-sustaining; they operate outside of the nonprofit sector due to legacies of institutional racism and/or culturally based values of community sustainability. Community-based cultural organizations also contract with schools or districts to offer supplementary arts courses.

# THE VALUES OF ARTS EDUCATION

Arts education plays a vital role in the personal and professional development of citizens and, more broadly, the economic growth and social sustainability of communities. Its loss or diminution from the system would be incalculable. And yet, despite widespread support from parents and the general public, arts education still struggles to be prioritized by decision-makers. We believe one reason the arts are not prioritized stems from a disconnect between the perceived value of the arts and the real benefits experienced by students. We often heard in our outreach that the arts are misunderstood; one listening-session participant, a leader in arts education advocacy, noted that “decision-makers may have a flawed vision of what arts learning is in their heads, and they make decisions based on that vision.”

To remedy this, in this section we document the important attributes, values, and skills that come from arts education. We argue that arts education:

- Builds well-rounded individuals;
- Broadens our understanding and appreciation of other cultures and histories;
- Supports social and emotional development;
- Builds empathy, reduces intolerance, and generates acceptance of others;

“Though I personally have enjoyed and benefited tremendously from arts education, it is in my role as parent that I see most poignantly the power of arts education. I have seen my children think, feel, and connect through the arts in ways exponentially more powerful than they could without. When we moved to a community which did not support art education . . . I not only saw my own children struggle socially, emotionally, and academically; but also saw the devastating effects on the youth community. I am delighted now, in a new community, to see my children perform in musical and theatrical productions as well as to develop habits of inquiry, resourcefulness, and persistence through visual art. These experiences overshadow the toll that lack of arts opportunities took. Yet I grieve for those who do not have such access.”

–ERIN, PARENT, CAMDENTON, MISSOURI

- Improves school engagement and culture;
- Develops valuable life and career skills; and
- Strengthens community and civic engagement.

Many of these social and emotional benefits are intertwined with the priorities facing our school systems as we recover from the pandemic. These themes are enriched by a broad collection of voices—students, parents, arts educators, artists, and others—who told us about their experiences with arts education and how they have benefited.

## Arts Education Builds Well-Rounded Individuals

**S**imilar to math, science, or history, the arts are a way of knowing and understanding the world and the complexity

of human experience. Arts education builds an appreciation for the arts, and provides students with an introduction to artistic disciplines, techniques, and major movements that serves as a foundation for lifelong engagement. As such, the arts should not be viewed as a frill or subservient to other disciplines. Knowledge of the Renaissance, the Harlem Renaissance, pottery crafting techniques, or the fundamentals of perspective and design holds no less value than knowing the chemical formula for photosynthesis or how to calculate the circumference of a circle. And for many, it will mean much more. Indeed, research from the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) found that childhood arts exposure is the number one predictor of arts participation as an adult.<sup>37</sup> Without that exposure, this window to the world remains hidden.

“I married a humanities professor, poet, and semiprofessional musician who had been saved by music as a child and had the opportunity to grow up playing in the Cleveland Symphony Orchestra. This of course meant that our house has been filled with music and musicians forever. . . . When it came time for our children to play instruments, my husband steered them toward instruments that would complete his future jazz trio. He was still on the trumpet, my son emerged as the piano player, and my daughter was on the upright bass. When they were small, they would pretend or struggle through, but last year before my husband Greg died unexpectedly, there they were playing “All Blues” by Miles Davis in the trio he envisioned. When they are feeling down or need to remember him, they go back to their instruments without prompting and just play. . . . [Art] becomes a means to connect and remember.”

– DR. MARIA TRENT, PHYSICIAN-SCIENTIST, MARYLAND



### Arts Education Broadens Our Understanding of and Appreciation for Other Cultures and Histories

Alongside the deeper insights into the world that can come from the arts, they also provide a vital link to the past. Art spans time and space and opens a window into experiences distant from us. From the cave paintings of Lascaux to Hokusai's *The Great Wave* to Lin Manuel Miranda's *Hamilton*, the arts document the richness of human history, preserved for future generations to contemplate and build upon. Arts education uniquely gives students the opportunity to engage with the past in a way that brings history to life and goes beyond textbooks. Expanding the curriculum beyond the Western-centric canon furthers these opportunities for deeper understanding and appreciation across cultures. Research shows that arts education not only increases historical knowledge but also historical empathy, opening up a deep understanding of what it was like to live in different times and places.<sup>38</sup>

Art can also offer a way to preserve the cultural heritage of marginalized communities by engaging communities whose histories and culture have been suppressed or forgotten.



Jamaica Osorio, an artist and scholar, told us that in her Hawaiian immersion school, arts were deeply integrated:

“So, when we studied literature, we studied these ancient *mo'olelo*—these stories, histories, and literatures, and these songs of our *kūpuna*—of our ancestors—and that was the primary document. . . . I've devoted my life to the study of Hawaiian literature and, in particular, literature in Hawaiian, and have devoted my work to trying to re-present these texts through poetry in a way that will be relevant and resonant with the people of my generation, who may feel—for whatever reason—distanced or disconnected from that archive.”



“The art classroom is a perfect place to introduce students to a world beyond their own. Through art-historical experiences, students can connect past and present events, realize that history is explored and experienced through art, and appreciate the struggles and triumphs of times they have not lived through.”

—JESSICA, VISUAL ARTS EDUCATOR, ALTOONA, PA

At every stage and in every school, the connections the arts open to the past can help deepen a child's understanding of the world.

## Arts Education Supports Social and Emotional Development

**A**rts education is also a key ingredient in social and emotional learning, a growing priority for education policy-makers over the past decade.<sup>39</sup> The arts facilitate personal and emotional growth by providing opportunities for students to reflect on who they are and who they want to be. Artistic works expose students to deep personal perspectives and intimate experiences, and through these experiences students find new ways to see themselves and their role in the world. It is not surprising that many adults can reference key pieces of literature, poetry, and other artworks that have helped define who they are.

Similarly, the process of making art necessitates the formation of one's own perspective. The need to then share that perspective

gives students space to form and refine their own voice. Different arts disciplines provide distinct opportunities for students to learn to express themselves. For instance, Irishia Hubbard, a dance teacher with the Turnaround Arts Network in Santa Ana, California, works with middle school students (grades 6–8) on the dance team. After journaling and talking about experiences of immigration and borders, her students produce, rehearse, and perform a dance exploring those feelings. Ashley, an eighth-grade student, described the experience, observing that “this dance means a lot to me, because at one point in my life I was separated from my brother and my dad.” Stephanie Phillips, the Santa Ana superintendent, added, “they have absolutely blossomed, as performers, but also as expressive advocates of themselves; they are now talking about things that are of concern to them and learning to express them, not only artistically, but in simple terms of how to have collaborative and very constructive conversation.” Chiamaka, an eleventh-grader from North Carolina who shared her perspective with us, stated simply that art “has given me a voice.”

“It is not an overstatement to say the arts saved my life. My arts education, particularly in high school, centered on vocal music, forensic theater, and traditional performance theater. Each of these inherently came with a community of people who—while all similar—taught one another to see the world through myriad eyes. I gained a siblinghood who provided creative and constructive outlets for the breadth of human emotion; I learned what it meant to be an ally; I gained the confidence to be myself and the assurance that ‘myself’ is exactly who the world needs me to be.”

—LYNNEA, ARTS ADMINISTRATOR, SUBURBAN TENNESSEE



Carly, a twelfth-grader with cerebral palsy from New Mexico, told us that arts education helped her “step outside of my comfort zone.” Finding a place in theater gave her a place to be seen:

“I’ve had a lot of people tell me . . . that they wouldn’t cast me, that they wouldn’t do it, it would be too hard on me, and they basically didn’t want to risk it. And then I finally found a director who gave me my first lead role, and just being up there and realizing that everybody’s looking at me and they’re not just seeing a disability, they’re seeing me expressing myself in the way I loved. I just never wanted them to stop seeing me that way.”

### Arts Education Builds Empathy, Reduces Intolerance, and Generates Acceptance of Others

The arts have long had a role in bending the arc of history toward justice. Just as the arts help us better understand ourselves, they also improve our ability to empathize with others. As Mary Anne

Carter, the twelfth chair of the NEA recently noted, “The arts are a powerful antidote against bigotry and hate. The arts can build bridges, promote tolerance, and heal social divisions.”<sup>40</sup> We have all witnessed the power of the arts to promote understanding, from the ability of plays like *Angels in America* to challenge how audiences saw AIDS, to the unifying role that music played in the Civil Rights Movement.

Arts education exposes students to a greater diversity of opinions and ideas. This in turn can challenge preconceived notions of others and build greater empathy and acceptance. A growing body of research confirms the power of arts education to contribute to these pro-social behaviors.<sup>41</sup> For instance, research in California public schools revealed that drama activities prompted students to take on different perspectives through interpreting a character’s motivation.<sup>42</sup> Loie, an eighth-grade student from Winston-Salem, North Carolina, told us that through her experiences with arts courses, “I’m able to express my opinions and be open to other people’s opinions. . . . I can look at their experience and learn from it. . . . There’s different ways of looking at things.”



“Effectively communicating that we understand what another person is feeling is one of the greatest gifts we can give to another human being . . . from listening to even just a single movement of music by a classical composer . . . abstract, wordless music can transcend time and ethnicity in its ability to communicate the full depth of human emotion.”

– GEORGE, TEACHING ARTIST (MUSIC), BEDMINSTER, NJ

## Arts Education Improves School Engagement and Culture

In a perfect world, students would enthusiastically look forward to coming to school. Educators are continually searching for ways to excite students about learning, combat chronic absenteeism, and curb the dropout rate. Engaging students in their own learning process is not only important for the time they spend in school but is essential to inculcating a lifelong love of learning and discovery.

Arts education is particularly well-suited to combat complacent attitudes toward learning. Indeed, research finds that students enrolled in arts courses have improved attendance, and the effects are larger for students with a history of chronic absenteeism.<sup>43</sup> Related research finds that arts learning generates spaces “full of student passion and apprenticeship style learning.”<sup>44</sup> The arts provide students a sense of ownership and agency over their own education. Students who enroll in a theater class, for example, gain a sense of purpose as they work toward opening night, and they build a community with their peers and teachers as they work together toward a common goal. Alex, an arts educator from Chicago, illustrated it this way:



“I believe that it is imperative for students to have voice and choice in their learning . . . students are more invested and take more risks when they create from the point of what is personal or important to them. . . . When students discover an idea or medium that speaks to them, they become more invested in learning and creating.”

Arts education also improves school engagement by providing different ways of accessing educational content. In a nation

“I really disliked school and thought it was an incredible waste of time and looked forward to turning sixteen so that I could drop out like my Dad had done. The one thing that kept me in school was that I really loved band. I couldn’t see myself leaving the band behind, and so I stayed in school and even went to college. Not as a music major, but I continued to play in the College Marching and Concert bands. Now I work in Arts Education and hope that the artists we send to perform in schools and teach workshops are finding the students who are bored and dislike school and are giving them a reason to stay.”

–DONNAJEAN, ARTS EDUCATOR, KENDALL PARK, NJ


with over 50 million K–12 students, schools need a broad set of entry points for students to discover what kinds of learning environments work best for them. Jessica, a visual arts educator from Altoona, Pennsylvania, told us, “Students who may be low achievers in the academic classroom are some of my highest functioning students in the art room. . . . Everyone has strengths and everyone has weaknesses.” Not all students learn the same way, and art offers students with different learning styles another mechanism by which to absorb content and ideas. Jensen, an eleventh-grader from Washington state, told us, “from taking art classes I learned that having a different pace or approach to things is okay, and everyone learns and makes things in their own way. And that really helped with my self-esteem in school and outside of school.”

Finally, the collaborative nature of the arts can build strong bonds among students, teachers, and parents, thus contributing to a more positive school culture. Teachers in schools with higher levels of arts education report greater parental involvement.<sup>45</sup> Erin, the parent from

Missouri, relayed this compelling story about her children:

*“This year [2020] was, as was the case for most of us around the world, a particularly tough year. My children were uncharacteristically seized with anxiety and dread about returning to school. One child in particular, typically a bright and eager student, despaired the return. It was not her friends but her art teachers—and the experiences they collaboratively created—that completely turned her attitude around. For that, I am forever grateful; for in the midst of dread and despair, art helps us to meet and support one another.”*

### Arts Education Develops Valuable Life and Career Skills

 Arts education also imparts valuable skills that will serve students in their lives and careers: observation,

*“I grew up in a dysfunctional family . . . and I wrote about all the loss and damage of growing up in a dysfunctional family—the abuse and the neglect. And when I was a senior in high school, the very last thing that happened before I graduated was someone turned in one of my poems, and it won the poetry contest for the [school’s literary magazine]. It was profound. I wasn’t this zero nothing, and my work had merit. And it planted a seed that really navigated the rest of my life. . . . That little measure of recognition really formed everything, and I’m so grateful for everybody that made that literary magazine exist in this enormous high school. There were lots of sports and lots of clubs and that tiny literary magazine was, I assume for other writers like me, a life raft—a lifesaving raft.”*

**—MARY AGNES ANTONOPOULOS, COPYWRITER, MONROE, NY**



problem-solving, innovation, and critical thinking.<sup>46</sup> Participating in the arts can also improve communication skills, generate self-esteem, teach collaboration, and increase confidence. Such skills are valuable to artists and non-artists alike. For those interested in careers in the arts, from musicians to music producers, fine artists to graphic designers, arts courses provide an opportunity for career exploration and a foundation for career choices.

Moreover, specific skills covered through arts education directly affect a broad swath of careers outside the core arts careers. Stephanie, an arts educator in suburban California, told us that her main goal in teaching art is “developing creativity and innovation.” From the interior designer relying on color theory to the architect who uses 3D software to

the engineer who incorporates elements of design, the skills embodied in arts education have wide applications. Jensen, an eleventh-grader who had studied at a specialized arts school and wants to pursue a career in medicine, told us, “a lot of the things I learned are skills I would use interacting with people and the world around me, and not just a sheet of paper or something that’s on my computer.” The far-reaching benefits of arts education include work ethic and resilience. As Jade Elyssa A. Rivera, who works in arts education policy and advocacy in California, shared, “The arts were an essential part of my upbringing. It is where I learned the meaning of hard work. It is where I learned that, even in the face of systemic injustices, my dreams are achievable. It is where I learned that, if I just roll up my sleeves and do the work, anything is possible.”

“Arts education played an important role in developing my skills and preparing me for that dreadful thing we call ‘adulthood.’ This may be cliché, but it’s true when I say it’s taught me important life skills such as thinking outside the box, being able to adapt quickly to situations, developing that camaraderie with people, and being comfortable in my own skin. Improv is definitely something I benefited from in my arts education. The number one rule of improv is to never say no but always say, ‘Yes, and. . .’ That’s proven to be key to my success in life—personally and professionally. My arts education taught me how to be confident . . . flexible, creative, how to be a team player, and when to listen and talk. I can’t say for certain if I’d be as successful in my personal or professional development without my arts education, and I certainly appreciate what it’s done for me and don’t take it for granted.”

—AARON KUBEY, DIRECTOR OF ARTISTIC SIGN LANGUAGE, WASHINGTON, D.C.



### Arts Education Strengthens Community and Civic Engagement

Finally, arts education can lead to socially empowered and civically engaged youths and adults. Equipped with the knowledge, habits, values, and skills provided through arts education, students are well-prepared to promote democratic values and contribute to the health of our economy and culture.<sup>47</sup> Arts education experiences offer community and civic contributions with the potential for positive transformations. For example, Grace, an arts educator in Lake Arrowhead, California, described how, “Over the course of my 27 years of teaching art I have promoted community and

civic engagement with schoolwide murals on and off campus.”

Strengthening and valuing communities through the arts also occurs through collaborations between schools and communities. Leslie Imse, a music educator and chair of the Farmington Public Schools K-12 music department, living in Simsbury, Connecticut, shared an example of her school’s engagement with seniors in their community:<sup>48</sup>

“In addition to performing at our school concerts, student musicians perform regularly in their school and town community. After the 2008 recession, the music department realized that the population that was



“While I continued to love art and teaching, in 2015 I made a drastic career shift and left the field of education. I found myself working in the private sector for a large retailer doing ISD [instructional systems design] work . . . thinking this would be a new path. While it did end up being a new path, it wasn’t as far from my background as I thought it would be. It was only a few months into this work that I found myself applying for and being accepted for a role based on the fine arts and education background I had been pursuing previously. While it was applied in a corporate sense, I was given the opportunity to photograph, film, and design training for retail employees directly

applying principles I had learned throughout my arts education and career for an entirely new and unique audience. Beyond aesthetics and design, I’ve been able to apply the critical thinking skills, view problems from multiple sides, draft ideas, and quickly revise or shift. Many of these were formed through learning about art. . . . Without art and its impact on my life, I would not have the perspective, experiences, or career I do today.”

–IAN, FORMER ARTS EDUCATOR, ARKANSAS



hurting the most were the senior citizens in our community. We created a new event for the senior citizens, bringing them to our school cafeteria for a free meal and ‘a show.’ It was so popular in town that we annually have one ‘Senior Citizen Cafe’ in the fall and one in the spring. The relationships that students have made with the senior citizens are meaningful, as our musicians not only prepare music for the older generation but also wait tables and converse with the seniors. . . . This is one of the many service activities that the music department connects with the community.”

Arts education also provides opportunities for students to engage with current events both close to the lives of students and far away. For instance, at Clarence Edwards Middle School in Boston, the eighth-grade visual arts class run by Shari Malgieri follows the news—international, national, and popular—over the entire year and then collaborates on a comprehensive mural about the year as seen by the students.<sup>49</sup>

These aspects of community and civic engagement, in concert with the other benefits of arts education, prepare students to become effective citizens who are socially empowered and civilly engaged adults, equipped with the tools to contribute their own voices to the ever-evolving story of America. As Amanda Gorman, the nation’s first youth poet laureate, expressed, “All art is political. The decision to create, the artistic choice to have a voice, the choice to be heard, is the most political act of all.”<sup>50</sup> How we respond to the deficit in arts education in America—how we prepare our future leaders to refine and use their own voices—will help define our course for generations to come.

“As a person who facilitates arts-in-education residencies, I’ve watched people of all ages benefit from the arts. . . . I’ve seen teenagers weld beautiful fish from trash they cleaned from a stream to educate the public about the ways pollution threatens wildlife, and heard them say how meaningful it is to know that their work will make a difference. I’ve watched the joy on the faces of folks with intellectual disabilities as they crafted panels for a group quilt that would go on a city-wide tour. . . . Nearly every day of my working life is an encounter with the ways arts in education pulls people together, ignites change (both personal and social), and gives life to deep and lasting happiness.”

—MARCI, ARTS FACILITATOR, LANCASTER, PA



# POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Access to a solid education in the arts should be as fundamental as teaching students to read, as the benefits extend to every stage of life. But putting the arts in their proper place in the education system will require substantial change at the federal, state, and local levels. To address these needs, we lay out a set of policy recommendations to strengthen arts education through six key approaches: 1) Making the arts a vital part of every child’s education; 2) Elevating the role of the arts through data, research, and accountability systems; 3) Ensuring arts education funding is adequate and equitable; 4) Recruiting, developing, and supporting arts educators; 5) Expanding arts education collaboration and partnerships within the arts education ecosystem; and 6) Restoring federal leadership in the arts.

## Make the Arts an Important Part of Every Child’s Education

The value of a quality arts education is clear, but the commitment to the subject—in both funding and course requirements—remains precarious at best. Given that, we call on states and localities to recognize the value of the arts, ensure a diverse set of classes is offered, fully fund those classes, and encourage students to take a range of courses by including arts among the core distribution requirements.

## Ensure a Diverse Set of Course Offerings

The arts comprise a broad and diverse set of subjects. While some students will respond to one form—such as music—others will find their talents lead toward other forms of artistic expression—perhaps media arts or sculpture. Given that, it is not sufficient for a school to offer only one or two types of classes. State and local



“[Arts education] is not about developing the next Picasso or Kahlo. It is about developing thinkers that see the world through a different lens. It is about developing thinkers to express emotions inspired by the world around them. It is about developing thinkers who challenge the status quo.”

–JASON, VISUAL ARTS EDUCATOR, OHIO

systems should recognize this diversity and ensure that students can have full exposure to a diverse set of courses in the field. These courses should also reflect the diversity of art forms by including cultural heritage and arts creation beyond a narrow Eurocentric arts canon.

## Provide Proper Funding for Arts Classes

If students are to have access to a quality arts education, their classes must be fully and properly funded. This is particularly true at Title I schools, where asking students to pay for or subsidize the materials necessary for learning is simply unacceptable. Arts teachers (like other teachers) also often pay for some materials out of their own pockets.<sup>51</sup> Funding for arts supplies and equipment is often unreliable and subject to cuts.<sup>52</sup> Tools and resources from Americans for the Arts provide indispensable material for parents, teachers, administrators, and other community leaders trying to make the case for support, and we encourage everyone with an interest to get informed and get active in their communities.<sup>53</sup>

## Make (or Retain) Arts Requirements

In our various listening sessions, we heard from children and adults who gained valuable experiences and skills through arts courses, many of whom would have taken more arts courses had they been core courses or required courses. Even though forty-four states required districts or schools to *offer* arts education as of 2018, only twenty states included arts courses as an option to fulfill graduation requirements.<sup>54</sup> We note with particular regret that some states seem intent on watering down or eliminating their course requirements. As this report was being finalized, for instance, a

bill was introduced in the Texas state legislature that would make the already modest arts requirement at the high school level (for just a single credit) entirely optional.<sup>55</sup> Arts education should play a larger part in high school education, with students being required to take at least two years of arts classes.

## Elevate the Role of the Arts through Data, Research, and Accountability

**K**nowledge is power. To gain a clearer picture of access to arts education and assure better research on the benefits of arts education, more and better data are needed. Additionally, school accountability systems are explicit acknowledgments of what we value and expect our schools to prioritize. Reforming accountability systems to incorporate arts education indicators and broaden the range of outcomes we want schools to cultivate is an important strategy to strengthen arts education.

## Revise the Every Student Succeeds Act to Require the Arts as a Reported Indicator

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015 requires multiple-measure accountability systems, which include annual assessments in reading and math, graduation rates, and at least one other indicator of a state's choosing. These other indicators have included measures of social and emotional learning and chronic absenteeism. The Commission recommends that the next iteration of ESSA explicitly require states to include arts indicators, as well as indicators for other subjects in the humanities, as components of their accountability

systems. In subsequent recommendations, we articulate specific ways states can include arts indicators that go beyond minimum federal requirements.

### **Increase Federal Funding for Research on the Health and Value of Arts Education**

The Institute of Education Sciences (IES) at the U.S. Department of Education awards millions of dollars annually for research on the efficacy of educational programs and policies. A caveat of the Education Research Grants program, however, is that all funded research must measure “academic outcomes,” narrowly defined by IES as including items such as student test-score achievement, course completion, and high school graduation. To promote a broader set of research addressing arts education, this narrow definition should be expanded to incorporate other aspects of a well-rounded education, including social and emotional learning, school engagement, and civic outcomes.

The NEA is also a key driver of research on arts education. Yet, despite being the main public agency focused on the arts at the federal level, in 2021 its baseline annual funding was only \$167.5 million, a miniscule amount of the federal budget.<sup>56</sup> Only a small fraction of the NEA’s budget indirectly supports arts education. The bulk of its influence on arts education arguably stems from coordination and research services for efforts like the National Assembly of State Arts Agencies, the Survey of Public Participation in the Arts, the State Data Infrastructure Project, and the Arts Education Partnership, and through Research Grants in the Arts and the establishment of regional NEA Research Labs.<sup>57</sup> Through these efforts,

the NEA has demonstrated exemplary leadership in generating data and research that highlight the importance of the arts. Yet they have done so with extremely limited resources. We recommend a significant increase in funding for the NEA’s coordination and research efforts centered on arts education.

### **Reinstate the NAEP Arts Assessment**

At the federal level, the National Assessment Governing Board should reinstate the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) Arts Assessment. The assessment was not administered in 2019 due to limited resources, removing the only national-level measure of learning in the arts. In addition, the scope and frequency of the NAEP Arts Assessment had been limited in recent decades. A reinstated NAEP Arts Assessment should be given in multiple grades and should cover all arts disciplines, with sample sizes large enough to be disaggregated to the state level.

### **Collect Better Data on Arts Education and Make the Data Publicly Accessible**

Increasingly, states and school districts have robust systems in place to collect and report on school-level indicators, and often these data are publicly available. Currently, roughly 60 percent of states publish data on metrics such as the availability of arts courses and disciplines, student enrollment in arts courses, or the number and types of arts teachers at schools.<sup>58</sup> More and better data will facilitate a clearer understanding of issues such as access to and quality of arts education. As Sir Ken Robinson, a leading arts education advocate, noted, “without data, you’re just another person with an opinion.”<sup>59</sup>

Data can provide leverage points for stakeholders to drive change. The State Data Infrastructure Project for Arts Education (SDIP), a joint initiative of the Education Commission of the States and the NEA, has spearheaded an effort to boost states' collection and reporting on arts education data. SDIP case studies demonstrate how making data available to education policy-makers and stakeholders provides a catalyst for improving access.<sup>60</sup>

New Jersey was an early adopter of this data-driven approach, with schools reporting that nearly all students had access to arts education. But deeper inquiry showed that access was uneven and that schools across the state failed to meet state requirements. Having more rigorous data ignited a multiyear, statewide campaign to strengthen access to arts education, and following intense engagement by state administrators, educators, parents, advocates, and students alike, the state adopted a new set of core curriculum standards. The number of students attending schools without access to the arts fell by 54,000, and 97 percent of New Jersey students gained access to classes in at least one arts practice.<sup>61</sup> Participation in the arts increased from 65 percent in 2006 to 80 percent in 2017, which translates to an additional 200,000 students receiving arts education annually.<sup>62</sup> In California, better data enabled leaders to shape statewide policy and helped convince legislators to allocate \$40 million to school-based arts programs.<sup>63</sup>

At a minimum, states should report data in three key areas:

- **Arts Access and Availability:** Include indicators such as the proportion of students with access to arts education and the breadth and depth of available arts disciplines and courses.

- **Arts Participation:** Include items such as the percentage of students at all grade levels who are enrolled in required and elective arts courses in various arts disciplines.
- **Arts Educators:** Identify the quantity and types of arts teachers and the ratio of students to teachers.

Alongside these basic measures, some school systems go further and identify the availability of arts resources, such as dedicated spaces for arts activities (e.g., a school theater, visual art lab, or music room), the number of community arts partners, the number of arts education professional development opportunities, and other arts education opportunities (e.g., theater performances or field trips).<sup>64</sup> In exemplary cases, arts education data can be explored through state data dashboards or district data dashboards.

### Include Arts Indicators in State Accountability Systems

Using data-driven accountability tools to judge school effectiveness is controversial. Critics have raised valid concerns that measuring performance along certain indicators can distort school behavior in unintended ways. As the saying goes, “what gets measured gets done,” and research shows that the introduction of accountability systems largely based on standardized test performance has shifted schools' emphasis away from the arts and other nonmeasured subjects.

Thus, one promising approach to strengthen the role of arts education is to formally include arts indicators in state-mandated measures of school quality. For example, New Jersey, the first state to include such indicators,

includes the percentage of students enrolled in arts disciplines in the state's annual School Performance Reports. Another early leader, Connecticut, includes the percentage of high schoolers enrolled in any arts course as one of twelve indicators of school quality in its accountability system.<sup>65</sup> Illinois, Louisiana, Massachusetts, and Michigan also include arts indicators in their accountability systems.<sup>66</sup> Following the lead of these early adopters, more states can strengthen the role of arts education by making it an explicit indicator of school quality.

### Expand Measures of School Climate and Social and Emotional Learning

The ESSA included additional requirements and flexibility to incorporate multiple indicators of school quality to ensure students

receive a “well-rounded education.” This shift was part of an effort to move away from a perceived overemphasis on standardized test scores and toward a broader vision of education. In many instances, states have opted to include measures of social and emotional learning. These measures often include indicators of students' well-being, confidence, self-management, and relationship skills, in addition to other indicators such as student attendance, graduation rates, and school climate. Not only are such indicators important to ensure we value a broad, well-rounded education, but the evidence suggests many of these indicators are positively influenced through the power of arts education.



“I was not the ‘sports kid.’ I could not dribble to save my life. However, thanks to my mother, I was significantly impacted by an arts education. At every level of my academic experiences, I was afforded many opportunities to learn and grow through the power of the arts. Whether it was theatre and public speaking or dance and movement or vocal and instrumental music, I gained skills and confidence that remain with me today. . . . Through my exposure to dance training, I gained an unshakable confidence that has also stayed with me. As a child, I struggled with low self-esteem. The moment I discovered my ability to dance, I worked hard to perfect the craft.

Because I was on the heavier side, some of my peers and even a few misguided adults assumed that I would struggle with the moves. Because of the confidence dance gave me, I quickly gained the name ‘Mr. Light On His Feet’ and more importantly, their respect.”

–LEVAR A. JONES, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, PROJECT GOODMEN, WASHINGTON, D.C.



## Ensure Arts Education Funding Is Adequate and Equitable

Fundamentally, a strong arts education relies on substantial economic support, support that is too often either lacking or unevenly distributed in the United States. The way education is funded exacerbates social and economic inequalities. While not segregated by law, schools in many places are severely segregated by race and socioeconomic status.<sup>67</sup> Historical racist housing policies and inequities in residential mobility have led to schools and neighborhoods with high concentrations of poverty. Schools facing these challenges would struggle even with comparable funding, yet in many cases they receive less funding because of the role of local property taxes in school funding formulas. A recent study found that schools with large populations of minority students receive \$23 billion less in annual funding than schools with low minority populations.<sup>68</sup> This affects all aspects of education in underfunded schools, not just education in the arts. Some of our recommendations here address the federal role in providing specific supplemental funding for arts education, as well as modifications to general funding mechanisms at the state and local level that will help ensure that high-needs schools, which often struggle to deliver the arts, are fully funded.

### Strengthen Supplemental Federal Funding for Arts Education

Though more than 90 percent of school funding comes from the state and local levels, the federal government provides supplementary funding through various mechanisms. Here we discuss both general and specific federal funding streams that can support arts education. Additional funding streams are presented

under the recommendation to Foster Collaboration within the Arts Education Landscape, where we discuss funding for school-community partnerships and cultural organizations.

**Strengthen and Expand the Assistance for Arts Education Program:** Funding for the Assistance for Arts Education (AAE) program from the Department of Education hovers around \$30 million annually, a small amount relative to funds earmarked for other education topics. Despite such miniscule funding, grants from this program have gone to more than 230 congressional districts in thirty-three states, providing supplemental funding for initiatives that support arts education programs in schools, provide professional development for arts educators, and generate research and development for innovative arts education. Increased funding and expansion of the AAE would have meaningful benefits for the state of arts education and would more closely align federal education funding with our shared national priorities.

**Increase Education-Related Funding for the National Endowment for the Arts:** Only a small fraction of the NEA's budget directly supports arts education, through grants for direct learning and for professional development in the arts.<sup>69</sup> In 2021, roughly \$2 million was awarded in the arts education category.<sup>70</sup> We recommend a significant increase in funding for these allocations that directly support arts education in schools. We discuss the NEA's Collective Impact grants for cultivating school-community partnerships under the recommendation to Foster Collaboration within the Arts Education Landscape.


**Harness Funding Streams for a "Well-Rounded Education":** Because the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) includes the arts under the federal definition of a "well-rounded

education,” federal funding streams that include provisions to support a well-rounded education can be accessed to support arts education. Provisions to support a well-rounded education can be found in Title I, Title II, and Title IV of ESSA.<sup>71</sup> These funds have been successfully tapped to support arts programs, including staffing, curriculum development, equipment, and arts partnerships in various locations.<sup>72</sup> Besides ensuring these streams are fully funded, policy-makers and practitioners should understand how to access the funds. We urge the secretary of education to issue guidance to states and localities regarding how these funding opportunities can support aspects of a well-rounded education that includes the arts.

### Adopt Student-Centered Funding Approaches

States should ensure funding reaches the schools that most need it. One approach is weighted-student funding, or student-centered funding, which places students’ educational needs into state funding formulas. For example, in addition to districts receiving base funding for each student they serve, extra funds can be allocated for low-income students, students with disabilities, and other educational needs. In tandem with weighted-student funding, districts should adopt student-based budgeting, which means that each school receives funds proportional to the state funding formulas’ allocation to districts, so schools with high-needs students receive the funding intended for them. While this recommendation is not arts-specific, striking the right balance of weighted-student funding and student-based budgeting can strengthen arts education by properly funding under-resourced schools that struggle to provide a full range of educational services.

## Recruit, Develop, and Support Arts Educators

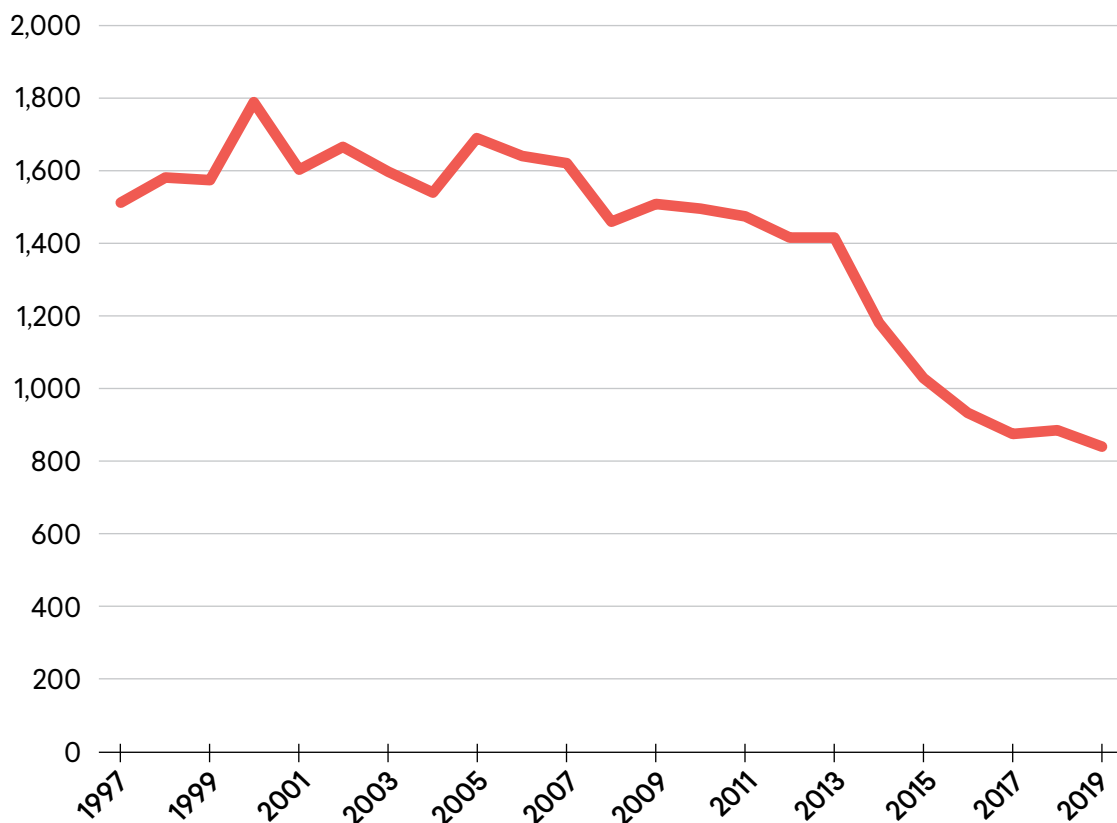
 high-quality arts education program needs well-supported, qualified, and diverse arts teachers. Yet, in addition to general teacher shortages, some areas also have shortages of arts educators. As a profession, teaching has become less desirable. Recent polls show that a majority of parents in the United States no longer want their children to become public school teachers.<sup>73</sup> Driving this sentiment are perceptions of low pay and undesirable working conditions.<sup>74</sup> Regardless of the reason, recent evidence for arts educators is troubling. After years of gradual declines, the number of college students receiving degrees in art education fell 40 percent from 2012 to 2019 (see Figure 3). That portends a crisis for the field.

To address these challenges, we recommend an urgent set of policy and funding priorities to increase the availability of arts educators, especially those from underrepresented groups.

### Strengthen the Arts Educator Pipeline

**Increase Teacher Pay:** A prime factor in teacher shortages is that teacher pay lags behind salaries of other college graduates. Even though two-thirds of Americans support increasing teacher pay in their community, starting salaries are often below \$40,000.<sup>75</sup> Adjusted for inflation, average teachers’ salaries have decreased by 4.5 percent over the past ten years, whereas other college graduates’ wages have increased relative to those of teachers.<sup>76</sup> Hiring enough quality arts teachers is difficult if school administrators are not able to pay wages comparable to other professions.

Figure 3: Trend in Bachelor's Degrees Earned in Art Education, 1997-2019



SOURCE: Department of Education, Integrated Postsecondary Data System.

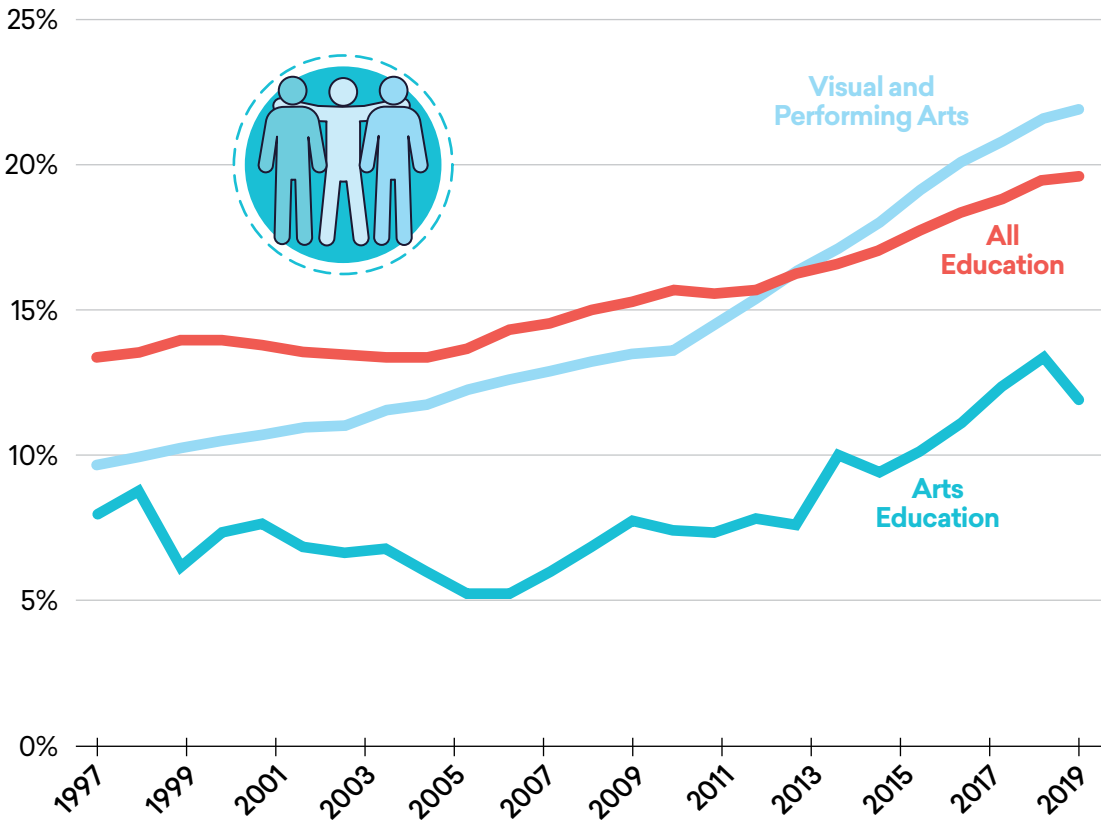
### Increase Diversity and Representation among Arts Teachers:

While a majority of students in the United States are now students of color, the teaching profession is highly unrepresentative. Nationally, roughly 80 percent of teachers are white, and 76 percent are female. Arts educators are even less representative: roughly 87 percent are white, while only 5.3 percent are Hispanic and 4.5 percent are Black.<sup>77</sup> Arts teachers are slightly more representative of the overall population when gender is considered: among all teachers, only 24 percent are male, but among arts teachers the figure rises to roughly 32 percent. Ensuring

that arts teachers reflect the students they educate is important, as a large body of research suggests that students of color who are taught by a diverse teaching corps have greater access to role models, cultural translators, and minority advocates.<sup>78</sup>

Universities, colleges, and high schools should partner to offer incentives and support systems to recruit students from underrepresented backgrounds. For instance, in 2017 Minnesota introduced the Increase Teachers of Color Act, which provided grants to fund “dual enrollment courses that encourage high school

Figure 4: Shares of Traditionally Underrepresented Minorities among Bachelor’s Degree Recipients



SOURCE: Department of Education, Integrated Postsecondary Data System.

students to pursue teaching and graduate-level teacher residency programs in school districts that enroll at least 30 percent students of color.<sup>79</sup>

**Improve and Expand Public Service Loan Forgiveness for Educators:** Created in 2007, the Public Service Loan Forgiveness Program incentivizes public service by forgiving a portion of student loans for college graduates who enter certain professions, including teachers who work for a consistent period of time at a Title I school. Unfortunately, aspects of the program have made it difficult for teachers to

fulfill the eligibility requirements. Reforming this system could attract more teachers to the profession and incentivize them to work in schools and geographic areas with high needs. Additional state-level programs, like the State Teacher Assistance Resource Program, provide debt forgiveness or scholarships for students who pursue a course of study or certification in a designated subject and commit to working in a geographic area with shortages.<sup>80</sup>

**Offer Incentives for Teachers to Work at High-Needs Schools:** Some schools struggle to attract qualified teachers because of

their geographic location or difficult working conditions. Some programs offer incentives to attract teachers to high-needs schools, but such programs are limited in scope and could be strengthened. One example of a program encouraging new graduates to work in high-needs schools is ArtistYear. Founded in 2016 in Philadelphia, ArtistYear works with AmeriCorps funding to place new arts graduates in Title I schools for a year of service that both increases access to arts education in those schools and strengthens the pipeline for arts teachers. In the 2018–2019 school year, they placed fifty-five teaching fellows in fifty-one Title I schools. Increasing the scope and funding for these kinds of programs could increase those numbers exponentially.<sup>81</sup>

**Leverage Alternative Pathways for People to Enter Teaching:** While the best-case scenario is highly qualified, certified arts educators, for many areas and in certain subjects, the long-term solutions will not adequately address the short-term concerns.<sup>82</sup> One way to address shortages is through alternative certification programs. These programs can provide an entry point for those who did not go through a formal university teacher preparation program. Such pathways are particularly valuable for artists who majored in their field of study rather than in education. For example, Milwaukee’s Fill the Gap program allows the Milwaukee Public Schools system to contract with arts organizations and teaching artists to fill shortages in high-needs arts education content areas.<sup>83</sup> Alternative pathways to teaching are also a particularly effective way to recruit a more diverse teaching corps. Compared to educators who follow a traditional route, teachers who follow alternative routes are more than twice as likely to be Black (13 percent versus 5 percent), nearly twice as likely to be Hispanic (15 percent

versus 8 percent), and more likely to be male (32 percent versus 22 percent).<sup>84</sup> Once recruited, though, these teachers must be supported with access to professional development and other resources.

## Arts Teacher Development and Support

Teachers are professionals in an incredibly demanding and complex job. Like any professional, they should be supported and afforded ongoing opportunities to learn and refine their practice. This includes engaging with other teachers via networks, conferences, and professional development workshops to stay abreast of current approaches.

**Provide Support to Engage with Professional Development:** Arts educators need time and resources to devote to the continual strengthening of their craft. Arts educators are often particularly isolated, as sometimes they are the only teacher in their discipline at a school.<sup>85</sup> Interacting with national, state, and local arts teacher associations can be inspirational, provide peer networking, and offer fresh curriculum perspectives. Teacher associations dedicated to teaching in all the arts disciplines—dance, folk and traditional arts, music, theater, and visual arts—as well as teacher associations specifically for educators of color, such as the Institute for Teachers of Color,<sup>86</sup> foster educational opportunities and professional networking that can positively impact arts teachers and, ultimately, their students’ learning. Arts educators often see a wide range of students and need a robust set of strategies to teach different learners. Preparation and development programs should include learning opportunities that deconstruct biases, such as addressing ableism and providing more inclusive arts experiences for disabled students. For

instance, a visual arts educator at a Texas university told us how service-learning involvement with students with disabilities allows future educators to “move to K–12 classrooms with less anxiety and tension around working with kids experiencing disability.”

**Ensure Educators’ Access to and Development of Culturally Responsive and Anti-Racist Arts Education Standards:** Arts educators’ work can also be supported by ongoing professional education in, and participation in the development of, national conceptual arts frameworks and sequential standards.<sup>87</sup> These standards should be inclusive of both the range of art forms and the diversity of cultural traditions. We recommend supporting the work of the National Coalition for Core Arts Standards and supporting educators’

access to those standards, as well as participation in their development.<sup>88</sup> Standards development should prioritize the participation of educators from diverse backgrounds, as this can build the strongest sets of standards.

### Foster Collaboration within the Arts Education Landscape

**A**rts-based school-community partnerships are an effective way to enhance access to quality arts education. In some of the most exemplary cases, like Arts Connect Houston, the Chicago Arts Partnerships in Education, and Boston’s Arts Expansion Initiative, broad coalitions of community arts organizations, cultural institutions, and funders partner with school districts to



“When I was growing up in southeastern Oklahoma, we really didn’t have a musical department, drama department, anything at the school. . . . My mama, who was the secretary for the superintendent, and my Oklahoma history teacher talked the superintendent into letting us form a little country-western band, ‘cause some of the kids in the school had talent. It wasn’t really until I went to college—Southeastern State University in Durand, Oklahoma—that I got to be a part of an ensemble, a singing group, and then I was in choir. One day in choir, our teacher was conducting us singing ‘Somewhere over the Rainbow,’ and when the choir sang and everybody was doing their parts, I looked at him and he was bawling. Just tears streaming down his face. And I knew at that moment, that’s what I want. When I sing, I want to be able to touch people like that. I realized that if you don’t sing with heart, the people you’re singing to, they won’t receive it with their heart. You gotta have heart.”

–REBA McENTIRE, SINGER AND ACTOR

facilitate increased access to arts education.<sup>89</sup> Such partnerships are also growing in non-urban areas, like the recent NEA-funded North Alabama Arts Education Collaborative.<sup>90</sup> Often, a “backbone” organization (such as Ingenuity in Chicago, EdVestors in Boston) facilitates these partnerships, bringing together parents, school leaders, arts organizations, philanthropists, researchers, and other community leaders and stakeholders. Through these partnerships, students gain access to in-school performing arts events, field trips and learning opportunities at arts institutions, and teaching-artist residencies. Teachers can access professional development opportunities, and

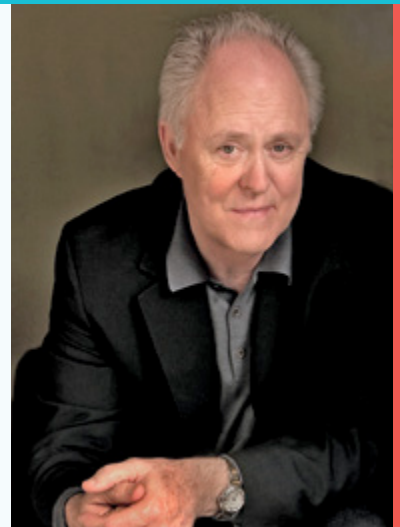
funding is often made available to enhance classroom arts education.

### **Increase Funding for Community Partnerships through the Assistance for Arts Education Program**

ESSA’s Assistance for Arts Education Program offers grants for “outreach activities that strengthen or expand partnerships among schools, local education agencies, communities, and centers for the arts,” and encourages coordination among “public or private cultural agencies, institutions, and organizations,

“When I was a school kid, I went to nothing but public schools—eight of them in fact. I grew up in a theater family, and we were a gypsy wagon. We moved all over the place, and I was lucky enough to land in Akron, Ohio, for ninth and tenth grade, at a time when the city of Akron, in its wisdom, decided that students with a particular interest in one of the arts should start their school day with two entire classroom periods in the field of the arts that they had chosen. Back in those days, I was intent on becoming a visual artist. So, I began my day with art. And I had the single best teacher of any teacher I had in secondary school: my art teacher Fran Robinson. She was an artist herself. She was a craftswoman who worked with fabric, making beautiful tapestries, and she was a great craftswoman. She was an older woman, kind of gruff; she had a wonderful heart and a great knack for bringing out the very best in her art students. We did everything: ceramics, silk-screen printmaking, collage, watercolor, oil painting. I could tell you any one of a hundred stories of discovery in that class. . . . The lessons I learned from her were skill, of course, discipline, persistence, but, above all, putting my own sense of myself into a hard and rigorous job of work. I’ve taken those lessons with me and applied them to just about everything I’ve tried in my life. . . . I will never forget those days in that classroom and how they changed my life.”

**–JOHN LITHGOW, ACTOR AND WRITER**



including museums, arts education associations, libraries, and theaters” (ESSA, Section 4642). Increasing this funding stream will strengthen an essential resource for communities to leverage the full strength of their arts resources in support of a collective effort to enrich arts education experiences.

### **Increase Federal Funding for the Collective Impact Arts Education Program**

An additional pathway to enhance school-community partnerships is through the NEA’s Collective Impact Program in Arts Education.<sup>91</sup> These awards focus on “cross-sector community partnerships that include mayors’ offices, state departments of education, city departments of education, PTA organizations, universities, foundations, and corporations.” The program aims to reward projects that “are far reaching and include building diverse partnerships, collecting statewide data, and developing comprehensive communication plans.”<sup>92</sup> This is a promising strategy to enhance arts education partnerships, but funds are severely limited and should be increased.

### **Leverage Philanthropy and Foundations to Provide Funding for Sustained Collaborations**

Some of the best success stories in arts education can be found in areas where rich collaborations have taken root and managed to become self-sustaining enterprises. At the heart of many of these initiatives is support from foundations that provided the seed funds to establish backbone organizations to facilitate partnerships, raise awareness, and advocate for increased public support and funding. In

Boston, for example, a multiyear collaborative process that began in 2009 led to more than 17,000 additional students gaining access to in-school arts learning opportunities. Estimates suggest that the strategic philanthropic investments made in the Boston Public Schools Art Education Expansion Initiative leveraged a five to one increase in public funding for in-school arts education.<sup>93</sup> The ultimate goal remains increased public support for arts education, but philanthropic dollars can provide the initial dollars for research and development that bring together arts education providers and advocates in communities and lay a foundation for a self-sustaining coalition.

### **Restore Federal Leadership in the Arts**

**H**ow our national leadership represents the arts is a reflection of our shared priorities. Compared to our international peers, the United States provides little direct funding and leadership for the arts and humanities. Our final policy recommendations seek to strengthen the role of federal leadership in arts education.

### **Increase Funding for Arts Education through the Department of Education**

Public recognition of arts education by the Department of Education needs to be matched by a commitment to greater federal funding in this area. We particularly urge an expansion of the Arts in Education National Program, which focuses on students from low-income families and students with disabilities. Because of the wide income-related disparities in access to arts education, the nation should commit to narrowing the access gap among





communities and generate a more robust network of arts education for every child—regardless of income.

### **Reinstate the President’s Committee on the Arts and Humanities with a Renewed Purpose to Strengthen Arts Education**

Federal leadership in the arts signals that we as a people place a high value on the importance of the arts in our lives. Until 2016, one way the federal government had provided leadership in the cultural sector was through the President’s Committee on the Arts and Humanities (PCAH). Established in 1982 under President Ronald Reagan, the PCAH was a federal advisory committee staffed with representatives from three primary cultural agencies—the NEA, the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), and the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS). While the PCAH covers a wide range of subject areas, in the past it played a vital role in foregrounding the importance of arts education. We urge the president to restore the PCAH and direct the committee to revive past efforts in arts education. A renewed PCAH can provide a federal forum that coordinates actions within the NEA, NEH, IMLS, the U.S. Department of Education, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, the Kennedy Center, and other federal agencies. With a clear and cohesive mission that fully embraces arts education, a new

PCAH can leverage these key federal agencies to strengthen educational opportunities.

### **Commemorate Arts Education with a National Celebration**

Throughout this report, we have made the case that the arts are a source of inspiration, meaning, and joy. These aspects of the arts should be harnessed as a cause for national celebration. Though there are some existing examples of arts education awareness weeks, they are not well-coordinated by federal leadership. In 2010, for example, the U.S. House of Representatives designated the second week of September as “Arts in Education Week.” The following year UNESCO proclaimed the fourth week of May as International Arts Education Week and has sponsored the celebration annually since then.<sup>94</sup> However, neither effort has resulted in widespread celebrations by schools and other arts education venues.

Leadership from a reinstated PCAH could strengthen a national celebration of arts education, not only for advocacy but as a means for schools across the country to celebrate accomplishments in arts education. A national arts education festival in Washington, D.C., near the end of the school year could be a leading showcase, especially if joined by thousands of events in school districts across the country, to celebrate students’ accomplishments in the arts.

# CONCLUSION

## THE ART OF THE IMAGINABLE

**T**he American Academy's Commission on the Arts generated this report at an extraordinary moment in American history. The nation has endured the coronavirus pandemic for over a year. No aspect of public life has escaped its catastrophic effects. Disease and loss of life have been COVID's most tragic consequences, but there has been heartbreak, too, in the lost year of education and emotional development for our young people.

As America's leaders work to restore the nation and its citizens to literal and figurative health, we urge them to contemplate the deep restorative value of arts in education. The arts are essential to developing the minds and souls of young people. Arts education was already in a state of crisis and dire need before the fraught year of 2020, and the pandemic has intensified that crisis exponentially. We regard our report as a celebration of the arts, a gesture of optimism, and, above all, a call to action.

America is at a crossroads. We are a nation searching for meaning, a sense of belonging, and a set of principles to tether ourselves to. Continuing to deprioritize arts education will only deepen divisions where we desperately crave recovery and healing. At a moment characterized by isolation, disillusionment, and instability, the arts can be a catalyst for change

in education. Even as they build connection and shared experiences, the arts are a vehicle for subversion and questioning the status quo. The arts can illuminate the complexities of our shared experience and our fraught history. They teach us to be critical and thoughtful members of our communities and to strive constantly for the ideal.

As the personal stories presented throughout this report attest, through the arts we embrace habits of self-discovery, nuance, and the pleasures of doubt. The arts move us beyond superficial concepts of tolerance and toward a true acceptance of others and a celebration of our differences. Amid a set of crises where these qualities may seem especially elusive, they remain attainable, if one knows where to look. A more hopeful, empathetic, and imaginative future is possible; we need only choose it.

"Arts education has the ability to change the trajectory of a child. It points them toward the possible, breathes into them creativity and vision, and allows them to experience a life-altering confidence. It has helped create safe spaces for me when depression and darkness have surrounded me. . . . Arts education has helped me be seen by the world. I would not be the same without it."

—LEVAR A. JONES, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, PROJECT GOODMEN, WASHINGTON, D.C.

# APPENDIX A

## MEMBERS OF THE COMMISSION ON THE ARTS

### Commission Chairs

**John Lithgow**  
Actor and Author

**Deborah F. Rutter**  
The John F. Kennedy Center  
for the Performing Arts

**Natasha Trethewey**  
Northwestern University

### Commission Members

**Diane Ackerman**  
Author, Poet, and Naturalist

**Francis Collins**  
National Institutes of Health

**Elizabeth Alexander**  
The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation

**James Cuno**  
The J. Paul Getty Trust

**Maribel Alvarez**  
The University of Arizona

**Paul DiMaggio**  
New York University

**Rod Bigelow**  
Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art

**Oskar Eustis**  
The Public Theater

**Terence Blanchard**  
Jazz Trumpeter and Composer

**Katherine Farley**  
Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts

**Mary Bordeaux**  
First Peoples Fund

**Theaster Gates Jr.**  
Rebuild Foundation

**Pam Breaux**  
National Assembly of State Arts Agencies

**Paula Giddings**  
Smith College

**Jeffrey Brown**  
*PBS NewsHour*

**Olivia Gude**  
School of the Art Institute of Chicago

**Louise H. Bryson**  
The J. Paul Getty Trust

**Nora Halpern**  
Americans for the Arts

## Commission Members *(continued)*

**Vicky Holt Takamine**

Pua Ali'i 'Ilim

**Maria Hummer-Tuttle**

Hummer-Tuttle Foundation

**Gish Jen**

Novelist

**Brian Kisida**

Truman School of Government and Public  
Affairs at University of Missouri

**Angela LaPorte**

University of Arkansas

**Tania León**

Composer and Conductor

**Sonia Manzano**

Actress and Author

**Michael O'Bryan**

The Village of Arts and Humanities

**Felix Padrón**

Arts Management Professional and Artist

**Annise Parker**

LGBTQ Victory Fund

**Mwalim (Morgan James Peters)**

University of Massachusetts Dartmouth

**Victoria Rogers**

John S. and James L. Knight Foundation

**Jacqueline Stewart**

The University of Chicago

**Yancey Strickler**

Kickstarter

**Steven Tepper**

Arizona State University

**Roberta Uno**

Arts in a Changing America

**Zannie Voss**

Southern Methodist University  
National Center for Arts Research

**Carrie Mae Weems**

Photographer

**Damian Woetzel**

The Juilliard School

**Jay Xu**

Asian Art Museum of San Francisco

**Kevin Young**

National Museum of African American  
History and Culture, Smithsonian Institution

**Laura Zabel**

Springboard for the Arts

## Commission Staff

**Allentza Michel**

**Mary Lyons**

**Tania Munz**

**Jessica Taylor**

**Robert Townsend**

**Susy Bielak**

**Paul Erickson**

**Gabriela Farrell**

# APPENDIX B

## STAKEHOLDERS CONSULTED

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**BY** any measure, the arts should stand at the heart of a strong public education. . . . The arts impart valuable cognitive, critical thinking, and technical skills used by artists and non-artists in their livelihoods, strengthening our economy.



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