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# Arts Education Partnerships

Lessons Learned from  
One School District's Experience

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Prepared for the  
California Arts Council  
Demonstration Grant Program

The research described in this report was conducted by RAND Education for the California Arts Council Demonstration Grant Program.

ISBN: 0-8330-3650-5

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Published 2004 by the RAND Corporation  
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## Executive Summary

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Arts education is facing some tough challenges in the nation's public schools despite strong public support for arts education and growing evidence of its benefits. Public surveys continue to demonstrate that the vast majority of Americans support arts education, and a growing body of research suggests that arts education provides a range of benefits for young people. National standards for core subjects, including the arts, were established in 1994 as part of the school reform movement, and most states have followed suit by adapting or developing their own arts standards to guide schools in establishing a substantive, sequential curriculum in the arts. But the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 does not require schools to be held accountable for teaching to these curriculum standards for the arts. Although states are required to administer standardized tests in math and reading and soon will be required to do the same in science, they are not required to administer standardized tests for the arts.

These latest policies, combined with the recent budget crises in many states, have resulted in increased instructional time in tested areas and decreased instructional time in non-tested areas, such as the arts. One of the strategies adopted by schools to address this problem is to tap the expertise of community arts organizations that are working in service of students. Recent studies on arts partnerships between schools and arts organizations stress the importance of using such partnerships to move arts education beyond just occasional exposure to the arts, particularly when district resources fail to provide substantive, sequential in-school arts education programs.

The literature we reviewed for this study calls upon arts organizations to provide substantive educational programs for students, to help schools to develop an arts curriculum, to develop assessments of student achievement, and to provide professional development for teachers. Judging from the explosion in the numbers of arts partnerships around the country, the idea is taking hold. Schools benefit from such partnerships by taking advantage of programming and expertise they cannot otherwise afford to provide, and arts organizations benefit by gaining visibility in their communities, earning needed income, making themselves more attractive to donors, and building future audiences for the arts.

Riding a wave of public funding for the arts in the late 1990s, the California Arts Council established the Demonstration Grant Program in 2000 to provide funding to local arts organizations to build such partnerships with schools and to develop and evaluate arts programming for schools. In 1999, a year before the program began, board members of the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) approved one of the most ambitious arts education programs in the nation: the LAUSD Arts Education Plan, a ten-year, multi-million-dollar program to implement a substantive, sequential curriculum in arts education in four major disciplines—dance, music, theater, and the visual arts—for all public school children in kindergarten through grade 12 (K–12).

The plan began by providing comprehensive arts programming in select elementary schools (referred to as Arts Prototype Schools). A core component of the plan is to build partnerships with community arts organizations to develop and provide programs that enhance the study of the arts and support the district's arts education goals. The plan also calls for the creation of full-time local district arts advisors, one for each of LAUSD's 11 local districts.

LAUSD's ten-year plan has five primary goals for implementing K–12 arts education standards: (1) provide a substantive program of curriculum, instruction, and assessment in dance, music, theater, and the visual arts in all grades; (2) sponsor year-round professional development for administrators, general teachers, arts teachers, and artists working in schools; (3) develop partnerships with community arts

organizations and businesses to offer fiscal and programmatic support for the study of the arts; (4) employ print and electronic media to achieve Goals 1 through 3; and (5) evaluate the impact and effectiveness of the district's Arts Education Plan.

Our study did not evaluate the progress of this arts education plan. We focused solely on one part of the third goal: the creation of arts partnerships. Our conclusions do not apply to the full range of activities supported by this impressive program; however, they point to the importance of the first and second goals, which place the responsibility for a coherent program in arts education squarely with the schools.

## **Purpose of Study and Approach**

The RAND Corporation received funding from the California Arts Council Demonstration Grant Program to examine the partnerships between local arts organizations and elementary schools in the early stages of the LAUSD Arts Education Plan. Unlike other recent studies, which focus on profiling successful and fairly sophisticated arts partnerships, this study looks at a sample of schools and arts organizations to produce a portrait of how arts partnerships are actually functioning within a large urban school district. The purpose of this study is to describe the range of partnerships operating between schools and arts organizations and to assess the degree to which partnerships have evolved in their complexity and absorbed the lessons provided in the arts partnership literature.

We began by reviewing the literature on arts partnerships, paying particular attention to the best practices that the literature has identified as being characteristic of successful arts partnerships. We then developed interview protocols that would allow us to explore these characteristics within the partnerships we studied. The protocols focus on eliciting information on the following three major aspects of arts partnerships:

- Schools' and arts organizations' goals in forming partnerships
- Patterns of interaction between schools and arts organizations
- Factors that hinder or facilitate the effectiveness of partnerships.

## Study Sample

We chose a stratified random sample of 11 schools and used a case-study approach. We conducted several 30-minute, semi-structured interviews at each school, including interviews with the school principal, the school's arts cadre chair, and one arts teacher. We also conducted 45-minute phone interviews with the directors (or the arts education directors at large institutions) of 34 arts organizations and interviewed all ten of the local district arts advisors.<sup>1</sup>

## Insights from the Literature

The conceptual framework for this study is indebted to insights from the literature on arts partnerships that has been published over the past 15 years. In particular, we benefited from the identification of the various types of partnerships and the key features of successful partnerships, as described next.

### Two Types of Partnerships

Recent research on arts education has described arts partnerships as being of two major types:

- **Simple Transactions.** In a simple transaction partnership, an artist or arts organization offers an arts program for a school's students and the school purchases the program. The school does not participate meaningfully in the design of the arts program,

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<sup>1</sup> Although, as stated above, there are 11 local districts in LAUSD, one of the local district arts advisor slots was vacant during the interview phase of our study.

and the program provider does little or no needs assessment or adaptation of the program to the specific school site.

- **Joint Ventures.** These are more complex interactions. In a joint venture, a school and arts organization work together to define students' needs and to design an arts education enrichment program. At its best, a joint venture incorporates an ongoing series of events, includes preparatory and follow-up curriculum materials, and provides training for teachers. The focus of such partnerships is on teaching and learning rather than simply exposing students to the arts.

Theoretically, increasing complexity of an arts partnership is related to increasing effectiveness or increasing educational value for students and teachers. Therefore, although simple transactions can be of value, they are associated with lower educational effectiveness compared with joint ventures that are associated with higher levels of educational effectiveness.

### **Characteristics of Successful Partnerships**

Past studies of sustainable and effective partnerships between schools and arts organizations have consistently found the following features present in those partnerships:

- Shared goals with an emphasis on the needs of the students and schools
- Communication between partners and joint program planning
- Program documentation, evaluation, and quality improvement
- Leadership roles played by key stakeholders (e.g., principals, teachers, and parents, and community leaders in government, business, education, and the arts)
- Adequate funding, resources, and support obtained through broad-based ownership and investment in the partnerships.

## **Study Findings**

We organized the major findings of our interviews with arts organization and school-based staff according to three major aspects of arts partnerships: (1) goals, (2) interactions, and (3) obstacles and facilitators of the partnerships.

### **Partnership Goals**

We found that schools and arts organizations shared a common goal of developing students, although both tended to express this goal in terms of exposing students to the arts and providing opportunities for arts appreciation, rather than developing students' knowledge of or skills in the arts. Schools and arts organizations also had some notably different goals for their partnerships. Schools emphasized providing professional development for teachers as a key partnership goal, whereas developing teachers was rarely mentioned as a goal of arts organizations. The goal most often mentioned by arts organizations is promoting public awareness and appreciation of the arts. Promoting their organizations was another frequently mentioned goal.

### **Partnership Interactions**

Interactions between schools and arts organizations are minimal. The arts organizations typically develop programs without input from schools and offer them to the general community of schools for a fee or sometimes for free. Schools select from such programs, often using brochures mailed by the arts organization and little else to make their choices. Almost no communication takes place among school staff about the selection of programs, and none of the interviewees reported having a systematic decisionmaking process for selecting programs. Local district arts advisors, who are in a position to provide guidance in selection and evaluation of programs, are rarely consulted either by schools or by arts organizations. Even after selecting a program, schools and arts organizations seldom communicate, except to resolve logistical issues, such as scheduling or transportation. Neither arts organizations nor schools provide more than minimal orientation

to each other's organizational structures and cultures or preparation for involvement with each other's organizations.

These findings demonstrate that the partnerships described in our sample are simple transactions in which the arts organization is acting as a service provider and the school as a consumer. Most of the individuals we interviewed from both schools and arts organizations said that the arts programs provide students with a one-shot exposure to the arts rather than a program that is linked or integrated with the school curriculum. There appears to be very little interaction and substantive program planning between schools and arts organizations. Schools do not participate in the design of arts programs, and arts organizations do not routinely conduct a needs assessment or adapt programs to specific school needs. Although many arts organizations reported that it is possible for them to do some school-specific tailoring of their programs, schools perceive that such tailoring is either not possible, or too costly, or both.

School staff suggested that they prefer provider-consumer transactions because they require little effort to establish and maintain. School staff members seem to prefer partnerships that require the fewest number of contacts and the least amount of time.

### **Partnership Obstacles and Facilitators**

Although all of the partnerships we examined take the form of simple transactions rather than joint ventures, the schools and arts organizations nevertheless face multiple challenges in working together. Table S.1 lists the obstacles to successful partnering that were cited most often by both schools and arts organizations. Arts organizations reported more specific problems than did the schools, but there is a good deal of overlap in schools' and arts organizations' opinions on some of the main sources of partnership difficulties, including lack of funding, lack of time, and logistics. Both also cited communication problems as obstacles to effective partnerships. For example, although teachers are the key points of contact after a school selects a program, teachers are difficult to reach. They generally are not available until after 3 p.m., and they have neither office phones nor access to e-mail.

**Table S.1**  
**Arts Partnership Challenges Cited by School and Arts Organizations,**  
**Percentage of Sample**

Schools	Arts Organizations
Funding concerns (64%)	Insufficient funding (32%)
Time constraints (64%)	Logistical problems (29%)
Inadequate accommodation to meet school's needs (55%)	Overburdened teachers (29%)
Logistical problems (45%)	Insufficient instructional time (21%)
Inadequate information (36%)	Communication difficulties (18%)
Communication difficulties (27%)	Unfavorable attitude toward the arts (18%)
	Lack of teacher support (18%)
	Institutional bureaucracy (15%)
	Personnel turnover (15%)

One key difference in the perspectives of schools and arts organizations concerning the partnership obstacles they face is that more than half of the schools said that arts organizations are not accommodating their needs. Although arts organizations offer many programs that seem to address schools' needs—programs offered on-site at the school, during school hours, and sometimes free of charge—schools also have a need for programs that help them meet educational goals. Not surprisingly, given the difference in their diagnosis of the obstacles to good partnerships, schools and arts organizations emphasized different factors facilitating good partnerships. The partnership “facilitators” they cited are listed in Table S.2. Schools claimed that the most important facilitator is the availability of grade-appropriate arts programs that are integrated with the curriculum and that work within the constraints under which schools and teachers operate. This facilitator specifies a key way for arts organizations to meet school needs. Meeting school needs by providing grade-appropriate programs that are linked or integrated with curriculum was not mentioned as either a challenge or a facilitator by arts organizations and demonstrates that this critical need of the schools is not being clearly communicated to arts organizations.

Arts organizations said that developing working relationships with individuals at schools is the most important facilitator of good partnerships. School staff, however, did not seem to be as interested in building relationships as they were in receiving information that will help them to inform their selection of programs and to improve the efficiency of the transaction. Better dissemination of information about arts organization programs to enable more-informed program selection is a commonly cited facilitator mentioned by schools. Both schools and arts organizations highlighted communication and accessibility as being critical facilitators.

It is interesting to note that while some arts organizations found resistance to accessing their programs among teaching staffs, nearly a third of arts organizations viewed teacher enthusiasm as being crucial to a working relationship with schools. School staff did not mention teacher enthusiasm as a facilitator, although they did note the importance of helpful arts organization staff (perhaps as a counterpart to enthusiastic teachers).

**Table S.2**  
**Arts Partnership Facilitators Cited by Schools and Arts Organizations,**  
**Percentage of Sample**

Schools	Arts Organizations
Programs that are appropriate to grade and school curriculum (73%)	Working relationships with school staff (38%)
Financial assistance (64%)	Teacher commitment and enthusiasm (32%)
Increased dissemination of information (64%)	Communication (29%)
Greater accessibility to arts organization staff (55%)	Professionalism and expertise of arts organization staff and artists (26%)
Point of contact (55%)	Support from school leadership (21%)
Greater school involvement (36%)	
Helpful arts organization staff (36%)	
Greater parental involvement (27%)	
Transportation assistance (27%)	

## Conclusions and Recommendations

Although the arts education field has been promoting the formation of joint-venture arts partnerships as the most effective model for arts education, our study found that the arts partnerships in our sample are best described as simple transactions. This finding suggests that simple partnerships may constitute the vast majority of cases within our broader study population. As many observers in the arts education field have suspected, the simple transaction model may be pervasive among the nations' schools and arts organizations.

Just why the simple transaction model dominates is apparent from many of the challenges that were cited, especially by the schools. Ostensibly, a less-complex relationship requires less investment of time and resources and does not rely on the development and maintenance of numerous close-working relationships. However, our study found that even the simple provider-consumer type of partnership is not working as well as it should for either partner and is falling short of schools' and arts organizations' needs. Rather than propose the development of more-complex interactions, we recommend that schools, school districts, and organizations take steps to improve on their current type of partnership, even though more-sophisticated partnerships may have greater potential for educational effectiveness.

The recommendations summarized below are directed toward assuring that arts partnerships in the form of simple transactions address the needs of both schools and arts organizations and thus have greater long-term sustainability.

- **Establish partnerships that address the goals of both schools and arts organizations.** Although the needs of students and schools have been emphasized in the literature as being central to the goals of arts education partnerships, the needs of arts organizations are of equal importance to a partnership's growth and sustainability. Broad support for the arts from key stakeholder groups (e.g., teachers, principals, students, and parents) is a necessary component of arts education's longer-term viability. The potential of arts education partnerships to trans-

form public education and establish the arts as core subjects will not be realized unless schools and arts organizations understand how their goals interconnect.

- **Focus on teachers.** Given the limited resources of schools and arts organizations, both should focus available resources on developing teachers. Teacher support is critical to the success of arts partnerships and to the implementation and sustainability of arts education in schools. Investing in teachers enables the benefits from that investment to be passed on to students, to key stakeholders in arts education (other teachers, principals, parents, community members), and potentially to other schools (when teachers change jobs).
- **Use program selection to improve available programming.** As the consumers in the simple transaction model, schools can shape available programming to better meet the needs of students and teachers through their choice of programs. Schools that identify criteria for program selection and implement a clear selection process can maximize the contribution that external programming makes to their specific educational goals.
- **Provide comprehensive and user-friendly information.** The potential effectiveness of the simple transaction model relies on the efficient exchange of information to supplant close working relationships. Arts organizations require comprehensive information about schools' needs, organizational structures and goals, curricula, and available funding in order to design high-value educational programs. Schools require easy-to-access and relevant information on arts organizations to efficiently and effectively select programs that provide the best fit with school needs.
- **Orient arts organization staff to schools.** In addition to descriptive information about schools, arts organizations need supplemental information in the form of in-person school orientation to gain a realistic view of the challenges surrounding the provision of arts education in the classroom.
- **Facilitate access to key points of contact at arts organizations.** In addition to descriptive information about arts organizations and their programs, schools would benefit from having conven-

ient access to organization staff (e.g., at set times when teachers can call) to get answers to questions on various programs, consultation on program selection, and consultation on development of arts curriculum, classroom materials, and student assessment tools.

- **Enhance the “brokering” role for local district arts advisors.** Both schools and arts organizations tend to be highly diverse and decentralized. The local district arts advisors have the potential to act as information hubs or information “brokers” and can be invaluable links between schools and arts organizations. Their in-depth understanding of the district’s educational goals can provide much-needed guidance to schools that are looking for ways to evaluate art programs and to arts organizations that are working to develop programs that address school needs.

The most significant policy implication of this study is that schools must assume responsibility for creating a coherent, standards-based arts curriculum and become better-informed consumers of arts programs that promote that curriculum, rather than counting on the evolution of more-collaborative arts partnerships to accomplish this task.

The five core goals of LAUSD’s ten-year plan are designed to work synergistically to achieve the implementation of a substantive, sequential arts curriculum for all K–12 students in the district. The designers of the plan recognized the importance of local arts organizations in helping the district to achieve this ambitious outcome, although only in conjunction with significant school-based investment that provides for centralized development and coordination of an arts education curriculum and teacher training. Even within the context of a well-designed and ambitious program such as LAUSD’s, expecting schools and arts organizations to develop complex partnerships may be impractical and inefficient. Arts education partnerships that can work more effectively within a provider-consumer framework may ultimately allow many schools and arts organizations that are struggling with limited resources to make a lasting, positive impact on arts education reform.