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Revitalizing Arts Education Through Community-Wide Coordination

Susan J. Bodilly
Catherine H. Augustine
with Laura Zakaras

Commissioned by



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1776 Main Street, P.O. Box 2138, Santa Monica, CA 90407-2138

1200 South Hayes Street, Arlington, VA 22202-5050

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Summary

Arts education has been a low priority in the nation's public schools for more than 30 years. Reports from the late 1970s and 1980s reveal that students received little arts instruction at any grade level, and that what they did receive was typically casual and spotty. Severe fiscal crises in America's urban centers in those years exacerbated the situation as schools responded by cutting teaching positions, particularly those considered to be outside core subject areas. More recently, the arts have had difficulty keeping even a tenuous foothold in many urban schools because of general education reforms, such as the No Child Left Behind Act, that hold schools accountable for standardized test scores in mathematics and reading. In addition, site-based management, designed to boost academic achievement by giving principals ultimate authority over school curriculum, has in some cases created a formidable obstacle to increasing access to arts education in urban school districts.

In some urban centers, a countermovement to this dwindling presence of arts education in the schools has developed in the form of initiatives aimed at coordinating schools, cultural institutions, community-based organizations, foundations, and/or government agencies to promote access to arts learning for children in and outside of school. Our study examined this phenomenon in six metropolitan areas across the nation. The evidence we gathered about these communities' coordinated arts learning efforts shows some signs of progress but is also cautionary. In light of the historical factors that have impeded access to arts learning in the past, it is apparent that the efforts we investigated are, generally speaking, fragile. To succeed in the long run, such efforts must have committed and sustained leadership, sufficient resources, and a policy context that allows them to survive.

Purpose and Approach

The purpose of our research, which was sponsored by The Wallace Foundation, was to analyze how local arts education initiatives across multiple organizations were started, how they evolved, what kinds of organizations became involved, what conditions fostered or impeded coordination among those organizations, and what strategies were

developed to improve both access to and quality of arts education in the communities. In other words, our purpose was not to evaluate the success of these initiatives, but to descriptively and comparatively analyze their formation and evolution. We also analyzed historical trends in arts education over the past few decades to understand the conditions motivating these initiatives.

Our approach involved several steps. First, we reviewed the relevant literature and conducted extended interviews with nationally recognized experts on arts education to improve our understanding of the prevailing issues in the field and to gather recommendations on which sites were the most promising for study. This process helped us select six sites that reportedly were actively engaged in developing complex local arts education networks: Alameda County (which includes the cities of Oakland and Berkeley) in Northern California, Boston, Chicago, Dallas, Los Angeles County, and New York City.

At the same time, we identified major attributes of effective systems by drawing from the literature in various fields: systems development, coordinated delivery systems in the social services, and partnerships in delivering arts education. This step helped us build our interview protocols and analyze our findings.

Finally, we performed a comparative case-study analysis based on site visits, a document review, and interviews with about 120 participants across the six sites.

Motivation for Change

Because of the pervasive neglect of arts education in the kindergarten through grade 12 (K–12) public school system, most children are given only a smattering of arts instruction, and some are given none at all. Access to arts education, which is rarely documented, appears to be highly uneven. Surveys conducted in the sites we studied revealed striking inequities: While some schools had an established record of exceptional courses in the arts, other schools had few offerings or none.

Over the years, the difficulty of garnering policy support and resources for arts education in the schools brought outside providers of arts learning opportunities into the picture. Cultural organizations began offering more arts education programs to children, and, more recently, two other types of providers have proliferated: out-of-school-time (OST) organizations (such as city departments of parks and recreation and YMCAs) and community-based organizations (such as Young Audiences, the nationwide nonprofit founded to connect professional artists with students and teachers in schools). Beyond these organizations are a host of others, which we call *influencers*, that have taken steps to promote more arts learning: private foundations and business leaders, state and local arts agencies and city cultural affairs offices, and higher education institutions that prepare classroom teachers and arts specialists and offer professional

development in arts education. This proliferation of players has created a highly complex arts education ecology.

It is against this background that some communities have committed to building a coordinated network of providers and influencers to revive arts learning. The leaders of these coordinated efforts believe that by combining forces to accomplish a shared goal, they will not only gain greater leverage against the prevailing trends in arts education, but will also be more-effective advocates for the arts and command more resources for providing more and better arts education to children.

Patterns

Four patterns can be used to describe how community leaders in our six case-study sites approached the issue of arts education, located arts education within the community, coordinated and involved other organizations, and progressed toward their goals:

The Alameda County and Los Angeles County sites focused on expanding school-based arts education. In both cases, county offices (through the Alliance for Arts Learning Leadership in Alameda County and Arts for All in Los Angeles County) played the lead in network building. Stakeholder participation was highly diverse, and numerous school districts joined with cultural institutions and community-based organizations, as well as with influencers in government, higher education, philanthropy, and business, in well-established efforts.

The Boston site focused on increasing the access of at-risk youth to OST programs, a few of which were arts based. Coordination, which was just emerging at the time of our study, was among the mayor's office, local foundations, business leaders, and a public-private partnership called Boston After School and Beyond.

The Chicago and New York City sites focused on changing policy at the district level to facilitate sequential arts education in the schools during the school day. Coordination was primarily led by the citywide school district office and did not heavily involve the many other possible participants in the city as equal partners in expanding access to arts education. Multi-organization coordination outside of routine contractual relationships was thus nascent in these two sites.

The Dallas site focused on improving access to both in-school and OST arts learning programs. Coordination developed through the initiative of a community-based organization, Young Audiences of North Texas. In 1997, ArtsPartners, an outgrowth of Young Audiences, was created as a public-private partnership to provide integrated arts learning to all elementary students in the Dallas Independent School District with funding from the city, district, and private donors. In 2004, this organization was reorganized, expanded, and renamed Big Thought. Focusing at the elementary level, it successfully expanded access across all schools and began offering programs to families in several neighborhoods throughout the city.

Common Strategies

We found that despite the differences in their coordination efforts, the six sites used many of the same strategies to improve access to arts education:

- *Conducting audits of arts education.* Five sites had conducted surveys to benchmark the state of arts education in the schools. In all cases, the surveys illustrated profound inequities that helped galvanize support for the initiatives.
- *Setting a goal of access for all.* Five sites had set this goal. Some, however (for example, Dallas), had chosen to support access for all but to initially focus on elementary school children. Their argument was that as these children moved up through the system, they and their families would become the best advocates for arts education improvements in the higher grades. The Boston site focused on out-of-school-provision for at-risk children.
- *Strategic planning.* Five of the sites were in the midst of strategic planning efforts, often funded by foundations.
- *Constructing a case.* Three sites had spent considerable time developing arguments about the benefits of arts education in order to attract organizations into their collaborative and reach out to the public. One had hired a professional case-making firm for this purpose.
- *Attracting and leveraging resources.* Five sites had developed innovative approaches to funding that included leveraging and pooling funds. For example, in Dallas, Big Thought successfully leveraged funding from local and national sources. In Chicago, 17 local foundations and individuals joined together to fund half the salary for three years of a new position for a fine arts advocate for the school district. And in Los Angeles, Arts for All created a pooled fund. Each year, ten to 15 organizations contributed to the pool, and contributors sat on a board that met quarterly to determine how to spend the money. The sixth site, New York City, took a more traditional route to funding by relying on government money. When a policy shift toward site-based management later caused categorical arts funding to go away, their coordination efforts were inhibited.
- *Hiring an arts education coordinator highly placed within the school district administration.* All six sites had or were urging placement of an arts education coordinator in the school systems' central offices to advocate for the arts and secure a place for them in the district's core curriculum. Moreover, rather than hiring a teacher to perform as the coordinator part time (a more traditional approach), each site either already had or was advocating for hiring a senior, full-time person for the arts leadership role within the district.
- *Building individual and organizational capacity.* A key strategy of all six sites was to build the capacity of arts teachers, regular classroom teachers, and teaching artists

to deliver high-quality arts learning, and to develop principals and other administrators capable of planning and supporting such learning in their organizations.

- *Advocating.* Because of the extensive forces aligned against them, all six sites had been or were advocating for arts education on multiple fronts: with superintendents, principals, teachers, and OST coordinators on one hand; with parents and local and state policymakers on the other. Some sites also had been or were working closely with formal advocacy organizations that track local school-district elections and/or urge increased state funding for arts education.

All six sites focused more on expanding access to arts learning than on improving the quality of arts learning activities. However, all of them took a number of steps to improve quality—for example,

- requiring that curriculum be aligned with state arts standards
- developing curriculum frameworks and arts assessment tools
- qualifying programs offered by providers outside the schools
- putting in place peer modeling, review, and ranking.

Factors That Foster and Impede Coordination

In addition to common strategies, we identified specific factors that foster coordination and that impede it. In the early stages of the coordination effort, the fostering factors are convening key stakeholders to build support, overcoming ideological differences, identifying local leadership talent, and laying the groundwork for subsequent coordination. Initial seed funding for collaboration is another factor considered important for getting community-wide efforts off the ground. Once the effort is further along, the important fostering factors are acquiring sustained funding, convening and joint planning, and engaging in a process of evaluation, feedback, and improvement to ensure advancement toward goals. But perhaps the most important factor in building and maintaining the effort is effective leadership—that is, leaders that are capable, inclusive in style, and stable over time.

The finding that effective leadership is so crucial is not at all surprising: The obstacles to achieving the set goals and the difficulties of coordinating many partners are enormous. The sites found to have made the most progress were those whose leaders were capable (offered legitimate leadership to the effort), inclusive in style (desirous of including diverse organizations), and stable (dedicated to the mission, committed to staying the course). Typical of these leaders was that they did not just welcome diverse stakeholders to the table, they deliberately recruited them.

The factors that impede coordination are largely mirror images of those that foster coordination. They include lack of resources for collaboration, turnover of key leaders, and policies and incentives that prioritize other subjects.

Potential of Coordinated Networks

The struggle to more fully and richly infuse the arts into children's learning experiences involves daunting challenges, such as finding time and space for arts instruction in children's day; securing the support of parents, teachers, principals, funders, policymakers, and others for arts learning; providing professional training in the face of routine turnovers of staff and leaders in public and community-based organizations; dealing with the persistent scarcity of resources; and replacing general policies that continue to marginalize the arts. And despite best efforts, some involved in this struggle have seen progress made over a period of years disappear, wiped out by an abrupt shift in local political leadership or education policy.

Yet even the difficulty of the struggle and the preponderance of setbacks did not keep the coordinated efforts in some of our sites from emerging as a powerful way to change a community's perceptions of the value of arts learning and to strengthen its commitment to extending arts learning to all children. Rather than individually pursuing improved provision of arts learning for children, those who participated in these initiatives worked together as one dedicated crew. Certainly, a policy shift toward better support of arts education would be a welcome aid in the struggle, lessening its difficulty. But until that shift occurs, coordinated efforts across multiple organizations show promise for making a decided impact.