

Education Leaders and the Arts

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*Recent research has offered statistics on the availability of arts classes in schools nationwide, but little has been documented as to how those programming decisions are made; we know something about the types of arts courses that are most common, but not about the goals and beliefs that are driving the decisions to offer them. **In the eyes of education leaders, what is the most compelling case to be made for the arts in schools? What are the commonly held beliefs that guide principals and superintendents in their decisions on arts programming in their districts? How can arts teachers and education leaders most effectively advocate for the inclusion of the arts in the curriculum?** In the fall of 2012, the College Board's Office of Academic Initiatives conducted a national survey of 980 superintendents and principals in an effort to answer these questions, as part of its "Arts at the Core" education and advocacy initiative. Survey respondents offered their views on the current state of arts education in their districts and nationwide, the benefits of the arts in education, and the most prevalent challenges in providing high-quality arts experiences for all students.*

The Status of Arts Education

Strong locally, declining nationally?

Seventy-eight percent of respondents indicated that nationwide, arts education "receives a lower priority than it should." However, less than half this many felt that the arts are underemphasized in their own schools and districts; most survey-takers reported that the arts receive "about the right priority" in their own districts. This reasoning presents a challenge to arts educators and advocates, as it suggests that it may be difficult to persuade school and district leaders that their local arts programs are in need of any strengthening or additional resources.

The challenge of budget constraints

The majority of superintendents and principals surveyed reported that in recent years, arts budgets in their schools and districts have largely been either staying the same or decreasing. Furthermore, about 30 percent indicated that their arts budgets will not increase in the next five years. (An additional 42 percent chose to "neither agree nor disagree" that their arts budgets will decline.)

74%

of district leaders report that in recent years, arts budgets have been staying the same or decreasing.

In addition, only 29% of district leaders felt strongly that the arts will receive a greater budget priority anytime in the next five years.

Education Leaders and the Arts

In spite of these financial challenges, 37 percent of school leaders and 47 percent of district leaders reported that arts programming in their schools and districts *will become stronger* in the next five years, which presents additional challenges to arts educators. School and district leaders indicated that in response to budget pressures, they would be more likely to increase class size than eliminate arts courses.

The Benefits of the Arts

Experiences that can't be found elsewhere

When discussing the value of an arts-rich education, survey respondents highlighted the value in the *uniqueness* of arts-based experiences. They noted that exposure to and participation in the arts enable students to be more creative thinkers. In addition, more than half of respondents reported that the arts promote “well roundedness” in students, which they defined as “acceptance of differences, celebrating each other’s cultures, and motivating people toward common understanding and community.” Respondents also noted that arts participation can improve students’ emotional well-being and can offer an outlet for expressing one’s emotions.

In an effort to examine the arts in the context of a school’s entire curriculum, survey participants were asked whether arts courses are as academically rigorous as other subjects. While 53 percent of school leaders and 68 percent of district leaders said that the arts are about equal to other subjects in terms of academic rigor, 45 percent of school leaders felt that arts courses are less academically rigorous than other classes. When asked to elaborate on this response, respondents associated the concept of academic rigor with testing and assessment, and noted that arts learning is often less assessment driven than other courses.

Benefits of the arts

cited by survey-takers included the development of creative thinking abilities, well roundedness, and emotional well-being in students.

Advocating for the Arts in Schools

Connections to other subjects create value

Although survey respondents articulated the unique value that the arts bring to K–12 education, almost 40 percent of participants also indicated that linkages to the Common Core State Standards would strengthen the role of the arts in their districts. Nearly the same percentage of respondents stressed the importance of connecting arts curricula to state standards, including both arts-based standards and standards in other subject areas. They noted that it is easier to prioritize the arts when there are explicit connections to other subjects, and more than half reported that an increased focus on math and science is working

Education Leaders and the Arts

against improving arts education nationwide. Similarly, testing in other subjects was seen as a major contributor to a decline in arts program funding and access. As one respondent noted, “What gets tested is what gets done.” In addition, nearly half of all district leaders surveyed reported that the emphasis colleges place on arts education when evaluating applicants also works in favor of arts education; that is, they believe that arts experiences are an important element of college readiness.

The contrast between these findings advocating for cross-curricular connections, and earlier comments indicating that the arts are valuable because they teach skills and habits that *aren’t* emphasized in other subjects suggests that arts educators are being tasked with designing opportunities for students that retain the qualities of arts experiences that make them unique, while also connecting the arts to other subject areas.

Parent and community opinions matter

While standards connections were deemed important, **more than two-thirds of the leaders surveyed indicated that parental opinion and support are essential to the improvement of arts education** because parents can impact both the quality and the quantity of arts offerings. In addition, they noted that in their own schools and districts, parents and community members are “slightly to strongly opposed” to cuts in arts programming. Given that the opinions and involvement of parents and community members are some of the most influential factors working in favor of sustaining and improving arts programs, arts educators may benefit from exploring options for involving these supporters more fully in their schools’ arts programs, and from seeking further opportunities for community-based partnerships.

Slides highlighting further details of this research can be found at
<http://advocacy.collegeboard.org/preparation-access/arts-core>

