



Arts For All: The Logistics Behind Promoting Equal Access to Arts Education

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I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

For children from kindergarten to eighth grade, social-emotional development is a critical skill that impacts the entirety of their lives, and is fundamentally strengthened by education in the arts sector. Despite the benefits arts education has to offer, it is often overlooked, most prominently in underfunded communities. This brief will explore the disparities that exist in funding for arts education, and how making changes to current policy can rectify it.

II. OVERVIEW

Arts participation represents the growth of crucial life skills for the children of today's youth. Emotional regulation, identity formation, and social-emotional learning (SEL) are all traits that are proven to have been strengthened by access to arts education. Research has shown that "childhood arts experiences predict arts participation and engagement later in life," (Bowen & Kisida, 2019). Therefore, when arts opportunities are limited in elementary and middle school, students can lose the early skill-building and momentum that often leads to continued involvement and success into adolescence and adulthood. It is imperative that elementary and middle school children receive opportunities such as these, because this period of development is a critical window of growth and learning. Arts classes in public schools function as

a structured space for interpretation, persistence and revision, and self expression. For many children, these classes become a space where they feel safe making mistakes and learning from them.

A. Relevance

Arts access has a direct effect on children's developmental outcomes, and, subsequently, their success academically as well as in their future careers. As found in a 3-year study done in, Korea, students with stronger SEL skills performed better in later years academically in subjects such as in math and literature. Because of its strong impact on a child's future academic success, participation, and willingness to collaborate with peers, inequitable access to arts classes can lead to unequal emotional and academic development. When administered to groups of students in various states and countries, arts classes were found to improve children's abilities to explore and reflect on their identities, empathy towards others, and boost focus and motivation, especially for those in lower grade levels. They also improved on their ability to problem solve, a skill that is applicable to all subjects. Students in Malaysia performed better on math quizzes after receiving sessions of therapeutic arts classes, in addition to improved emotional intelligence scores. For these benefits to echo across all student demographics in California, arts funding must be equalized across all public schools.

III. HISTORY

Arts education has been in a steady decline since the 1980s, driven largely by a combination of budget cuts and shifting education priorities. As public school funding tightened, arts programs were among the first areas reduced or eliminated, particularly in under-resourced districts. This trend was only reinforced in the 1990s and 2000s with the rise of standardized testing, which placed a heavy emphasis on reading and mathematics performance. As a result, instructional time, staffing, and funding were redirected toward tested subjects, while arts education became increasingly framed as non-essential. This contributed to a reclassification of the arts from core academic instruction to “enrichment,” making it more vulnerable to budget cuts during periods of financial strain.

A. Current Stances

Today, there is a clear divide in how arts education is understood. Within many education systems, art programs are still frequently treated as non-essential and secondary to core academic subjects. This is reflected in scheduling decisions, staffing allocations, and budget priorities, where the arts is the first area reduced when resources are limited.

However, research in developmental psychology has been shown to strongly support the role of arts education as a critical component of social and emotional learning (SEL) and identity formation. Creative expression has also been shown to contribute to emotional regulation, cognitive development, and the ability for students to construct and understand their sense of self during key developmental stages. This positions arts education as a foundational element of child development.

Equity advocates further argue that unequal access to arts education reinforces systemic inequalities. Students in wealthier districts are more likely to receive high-quality arts instruction, while students in low-income or rural schools face limited or no access. This disparity contributes to unequal opportunities for creative development, self-expression, and long-term engagement in the arts.

At the policy level, there is growing recognition of the importance of arts education, reflected in initiatives such as California’s Proposition 28 and updated state arts standards. However, implementation remains inconsistent across districts, meaning that recognition of value has not yet translated into uniform or equitable access for all students.

IV. POLICY PROBLEM

A. Stakeholders

A wide range of stakeholders are impacted by and involved in the implementation of arts and education policy. Students are the primary beneficiaries, as access to arts instruction directly impacts their social-emotional learning, creativity, and identity development. Teachers and arts educators are also key stakeholders, as they are responsible for delivering instruction.

School districts, in addition to the state government, are critical as they control large-scale education funding, policy frameworks, and program execution. It is especially critical that children in underserved communities receive equitable representation and care, because the life skills and other essential lessons they gain from arts education programs will affect them and their families for years following their education.

B. Risks of Indifference

If disparities in arts education continue to be ignored, the most significant risk is the deepening of inequity in student development, particularly in social-emotional learning, creativity, and communication skills. Considering the already dire mental health crisis occurring in today's younger generation, it is imperative that children in the present and future are taught the life skills to successfully be able to express themselves, process their emotions, and navigate the world in a healthy manner.

Another major consequence is the loss of early developmental opportunities, especially during elementary and middle school years when students are most responsive to creative and emotional skill-building. It has been found that as children grow older, there is a steep drop off in the developmental payoff of administering social-emotional related arts education. Therefore, investing in children's social emotional wellbeing for their future selves is at its most cost-effective when being administered early on in their educational careers.

Finally, continued neglect of arts education will reinforce socioeconomic inequity in education, as students in underfunded districts remain systematically less likely to receive quality arts instruction. This systemic imbalance is what new policy should aim to eliminate, and is what the solutions section will focus on eradicating.

C. Nonpartisan Reasoning

Arts education remains a fundamental human development issue. It supports a range of shared goals, including improved academic performance, emotional wellbeing, and student

engagement. It also builds future workforce skills, such as creativity, collaboration, communication, and problem-solving. Research in education and psychology further supports the idea that early investment in arts education produces long-term benefits, making it a practical, evidence-based policy choice. More specific benefits to improving arts education for K-12 students include a heightened sense of self-confidence and a greater willingness to participate in other classes.

Finally, studies have found that early investment in the social emotional growth of students, particularly those in preschool and early on in grade school has been found to have the most rational and cost-effective. Therefore, it may be most logical to target younger groups of students, and invest more heavily in kindergarten-preschool programs in addition to investments made in grade school and high school arts programs.

V. TRIED POLICY

Several changes to policy have been made in recent years to help combat the education system's inherent lack of arts education, most notably with the passing of Proposition 28 in 2022. The proposition promises an annual \$800 million to \$1 billion in funding to support K-12 arts education, and specifically mandates that 80% of the funding must go to staff, while the remaining 20% is allocated to training staff and purchasing materials. Additionally, a 70/30 formula is used when deciding how much funding is to be apportioned to each school district. This formula more heavily takes into account a district's total student enrollment—districts with the most students will receive 70% of the funding, The 30% is allocated for school districts that have higher populations of

economically disadvantaged students. Recognition of the economic status of students in state policy is a significant step in the right direction. However, parts of the legislation have created room for funds to be misused and inaccurately allocated.

In the years prior to the passage of Proposition 28, several policies and strategies were used to promote arts education in the state of California. In 2019, the California Arts Standards and Framework helped delineate a structure that districts and schools could follow in terms of an arts education curriculum, but ultimately did not provide any economic support to school because it did not have a funding mandate.

Before that framework was put into place, the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) had determined the degree of flexibility states had in funding specifically for education from 2013 to 2014. Although it did provide structure for the allocation of money across districts, it ultimately was unsuccessful due to improper use of funding and the program having unclear goal-setting.

While each of these policies has attempted to alleviate the lack of legislation surrounding economic and structural support for arts education, they all had their own respective flaws that prevented the issue at hand from being fully resolved. To ensure greater positive impact is made, further rectifications to current policy have been outlined below.

VI. POLICY OPTIONS

Prop 28 Revisions

One option is to revise the Proposition 28 funding formula to improve equity in arts education access. This could involve adjusting the current allocation weighting, such as shifting it from a 70/30 distribution to a 50/50 or 40/60 model in favor of underresourced communities.

Adjusting this weighting would do two things:

- a) Prevent wealthier districts that already receive ample arts funding from siphoning a disproportionate amount of funds from the state balance, thereby directing greater support to schools that may lack teachers, facilities, and supplies.
- b) Could be adjusted to include communities that may need greater amounts of funding to be fully supported, such as including calculations for districts with greater poverty rates, a large English learning population, or communities that have historically neglected arts education.

Existing Mandates

A second option would be to strengthen enforcement and accountability for existing arts education mandates. This could be achieved by establishing a dedicated oversight body with the California Department of Education (CDE) responsible for monitoring district compliance with both the four-discipline requirement and Proposition 28 spending rules. Increased oversight would help ensure that funding is used appropriately and implemented across districts.

Art Educators

A final solution option is to invest directly into recruiting, training, and developing qualified and skilled arts educators, more specifically in underserved districts where staffing shortages are the most prominent. Despite growing budgets for arts education, schools and districts still struggle to provide meaningful programs for arts because they don't have access to credentialed educators. To address this issue, the state could issue teacher preparation grants, student loan forgiveness

programs, or salary incentives to arts educators. Overall, this money would come out of the funding approved by Prop 28 and be a modifier to the proposition specifically denoting that a certain amount of the money should go towards supporting arts educators.

VII. CONCLUSIONS

In an era where students are only facing growing crises surrounding mental health, income insecurity, and an overarching need for emotional outlets, it is now more than ever that we must invest in their love of creation, self-expression, and desire to collaborate in making something great. As an artist myself, I can personally vouch for the transformative and incredibly therapeutic effects of art. Art classes can help any child build confidence and decompress, all while offering a space where they can learn to socialize with others, form supportive relationships, and receive guidance from trained instructors. All these things are opportunities that any child deserves to have access to. With the changes proposed earlier in the brief, policy can become a tool that is wielded to enact life-changing educational progressions in the arts sector, thereby benefitting students socially and emotionally.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The Institute for Youth in Policy wishes to acknowledge Taylor Beljon-Regen, Patrick Pickren, Tiffany Li, Asher Cohen, Paul Kramer, and other contributors for developing and maintaining the Fellowship Program within the Institute.

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