

Strengthening The Arts By Supporting Arts Teachers

A Policy Brief from Public Citizens for Children and Youth

Introduction

To the growing ranks of parents, educators, elected officials, funders and advocates concerned about disappointing academic achievement, high dropout rates, negative school climate, truancy, and lack of student engagement, the arts present an opportunity to bring students with diverse learning styles together and involve them in new ways to develop their skills. A budding visual artist who may struggle writing a book report may more easily demonstrate his/her grasp of the book's content by illustrating it.

“Art is vital. For 53 minutes a day, Miguel, who struggles academically and behaviorally, has the opportunity to be measured by a different yardstick. For 53 minutes, Ajanah gets to depart from the demands of a high-stakes testing climate to use her other talents.”

- A high school visual art teacher

An enthusiastic musician who does poorly in math may be able to grasp fractions more readily through analyzing the rhythm of a musical composition than through a word problem based on serving slices of apple pie. Blending or integrating the arts with

traditional subjects as well as providing arts teaching and learning separately are once again being recognized as important positive components of good schools.

Research has demonstrated that low income students in arts-rich schools have better academic performance, higher graduation rates and a greater likelihood of college matriculation than those in arts-poor schools.¹ And yet while art, music, theater and dance as well as graphic design and digital media are common in schools serving middle class and affluent children, they are too often

treated as a “frill” and not provided on a daily basis (if at all) in schools serving low income children.

Confronted by dwindling resources and rising student needs in the last half of the twentieth century, Philadelphia along with many school districts across the country eliminated arts teaching positions. The impact of cumulative cuts became so drastic that in 2006, 67 of the 269 Philadelphia public schools (25%) had no music teachers, 55 schools (20%) had no art teacher, and 66 (25%) had neither an art nor music teacher.²



When the decline in the presence of arts in schools gained public notice through reports and public testimony, the School Reform Commission began to reverse the trend: 90 arts teaching positions were authorized and an additional 90 positions were added in the following year.

In May 2008, the School Reform Commission adopted a funded mandate for the presence of an arts or music teacher in every school. By the spring of 2011, the situation had markedly improved. Only three schools had no art or music teachers. Forty-three per cent (43%) of the schools had both visual art and music teachers, 58% had either art or music teachers.

The 2010-11 school year in Philadelphia began with 236 visual art teachers, 257 music teachers and 13 graphic arts teachers in 257 schools serving 154,482 students. The school year also marked the second Year of ArtsRising, a nationally and locally funded partnership of the Philadelphia Education Fund (The Ed Fund), Fleisher Art Memorial, and Public Citizens for Children and Youth (PCCY).

The mission of ArtsRising is to broaden access, equity, quality and opportunity in the arts for all children, to engage and retain students in school, and to equip them with vital academic, creative and behavioral skills.



Background

While organizations and institutions in the community provide valuable arts enrichment, basic arts education requires trained arts educators on a school faculty who have a sustained, daily relationship with the school's students, staff, principal and parents.

In its role as ArtsRising advocacy partner, Public Citizens for Children and Youth (PCCY) convened a focus group of Philadelphia public school arts teachers on February 16, 2011 to identify supports needed to attract, retain and develop arts teachers in the School District. Two additional focus groups to build arts teacher networks across the city were convened by the Ed Fund for ArtsRising.

This Policy Brief summarizes the input from 15 arts teachers in conversations with representatives of the School District's Department of Comprehensive Arts, the PCCY Picasso mini-grants project, and ArtsRising partners, and makes recommendations for enhancing arts teacher support.

Effective Supports For Arts Teachers

A major challenge facing the School District is to ensure that all arts teachers have the schedules, instructional support, mentoring, professional development, supplies, equipment, materials and budgets which they need to be effective in the classroom. These supports also affect the school system's ability to attract, retain and develop outstanding arts educators over time.

Participants often cited the professional development provided by the central office as a key support and a vehicle for refining their practice.

"The central music office downtown provides a music teacher mentor and a music content specialist, as well as several part time instrumental music coordinators who organize citywide music events such as the All City High School and Middle School Festivals, and the All City Jazz Festival. The central office also provides a limited budget for instrument repair, music, and bus transportation for the festivals, as well as piano tuning and repair for all pianos in the schools." - An itinerant instrumental music teacher

"The Philadelphia School District provides two full days of professional development to arts teachers every year. It is a wonderful opportunity to meet with my colleagues and it encourages our professional growth as artists and teachers." - A middle school visual art teacher

Others identified resources from arts institutions and community organizations as essential to their ability to provide engaging instruction.

"There are many wonderful resources for arts teachers in Philadelphia if you are willing to seek them out—because they're not coming to your door, that's the key." - A middle school visual art teacher

Scheduling

Many participants cited the need to improve their scheduling because they often have to cover classes of core faculty during prep periods. This practice often prevents them from participating in grade group meetings and common planning time.

"The District's culture of referring to art teachers as 'prep teachers' and frequently changing our schedules to cover other teachers, with-

out any consideration of our need to prepare and clean up materials, organize lessons and deliver a consistent curriculum, is dismaying."
- An elementary visual art teacher

While covering other teachers' prep time may save some arts teacher positions in the current budget crisis, this scheduling prevents productive collaboration with teachers of core subjects. Improving this scheduling could enhance arts integration and provide greater opportunities for engaging students in instruction.

Instructional Standards

Participants cited a need to increase the legitimacy of the arts in the District's instructional program. If arts education matters, they argued, we should have academic standards which identify what every student must know and be able to do in multiple arts disciplines at specified intervals such as

5th, 8th and 11th grades. The District and the Commonwealth each have minimal standards for arts instruction. Participants felt the arts standards should be clearer and more integrated into the curriculum.

Overcoming Vulnerability, Isolation and Marginalization

Many participants said that they feel isolated and marginalized because of scheduling or rostering issues which may result in their having minimal interaction with faculty teaching other academic subjects.

Arts instruction may be considered less essential to the school's academic success than other subjects, making arts positions more vulnerable to being cut during hard budget times.



We believe that three strategies can address the vulnerability, isolation and marginalization of arts teachers:

1. The arts should be integrated into the teaching of basic skills

Arts teachers should review the instructional standards and planning/scheduling timetables in tested subjects to identify opportunities for interdisciplinary collaboration. This professional development activity could be provided at system-wide professional development days and/or through voluntary workshops at regional professional development centers.

2. Arts teachers should learn how to champion their work

Arts teachers can benefit from learning how to communicate the value of their disciplines to their principals who make school budget decisions; to elected officials who make statewide funding decisions that determine the level of District resources; and to the School Reform Commission (school board), who decide how to allocate available funds. The best spokespersons for arts education are arts educators and their students.

3. Educators, decision-makers, the public and the media should understand the impact of the arts on academic performance.

Numerous national studies have documented the positive impact of arts education on improving students' attendance,



behavior, academic performance and college matriculation. Highlights of these findings should be presented to faculty and parent meetings, the Superintendent's Cabinet, the School Reform Commission, City Council, the Governor, the Pennsylvania Secretary of Education, the education committees of the Pennsylvania General Assembly, as well as to citywide and neighborhood media.

Protecting The Arts In Difficult Budget Times

Philadelphia is a city where the arts are a major and growing part of the economy; local and national foundations provide millions of philanthropic dollars into arts institutions and emerging and established artists year after year. The school district, like many others throughout the country, is facing the need to make difficult and at times drastic budget decisions. We are pleased that recent cuts to the arts were less drastic than were feared. While the arts have been protected in many ways thus far, it is imperative for arts teachers to find the time for advocacy, both to address the immediate budget crisis and to build an active arts education constituency over time.

There has been growth in advocacy for the arts in education in recent years. Arts advocates have contacted elected representatives, spoken at SRC meetings, sent letters to leadership of the schools and the city, visited with school principals, spoken with the media, urging that we not turn our backs on our recent progress.

Many have joined campaigns to keep the arts in our schools. ArtsRising, the Greater Philadelphia Cultural Alliance, PCCY and many others are raising public awareness and citizen action. But the on-going budget crisis requires on-going commitment and action at the school and central office levels.

Conclusion

We believe that every Philadelphia child should have a robust arts education both in school and in the many neighborhoods and downtown arts venues which make Philadelphia an amazingly arts rich city. As the key providers of arts education, arts teachers and the work they do must be recognized as essential to their schools' academic success.

Together, we must provide support, improve scheduling, develop better ways to stimulate and secure collaboration between arts teachers and other school faculty, and increase awareness of the positive impact of the arts on learning. We can do this. Together we can make the difference.

Endnotes

1. Catterall, James S. Doing WELL and Doing GOOD by Doing ART. Los Angeles: Imagination Group, 2009.
2. PCCY. A Portrait of Arts Education in our Public Schools. March 2008.



***We can do this.
We can make the difference.***

This brief was produced by PCCY as a member of ArtsRising, a collaborative arts for youth initiative of the Philadelphia Education Fund, Fleisher Art Memorial and Public Citizens for Children and Youth.

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For more information, go to www.myartsrising.org.





Arabic dance students from Motivation High School with staffer from State Senator Anthony Williams office with teacher and representatives from Philadanco and PCCY.

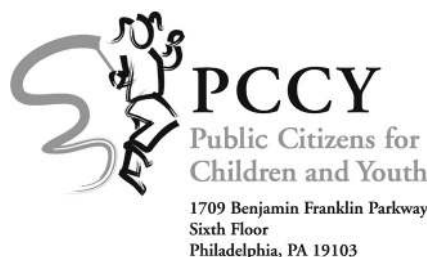


Spiral Q parade at McClure school with art teacher, students and staffer from State Representative Tony Payton's office.



State Representative James Roebuck with Lea School art teacher, students and Gretchen Elise Walker from PCCY.

About PCCY: Founded in 1980, Public Citizens for Children and Youth (PCCY) serves as the region's leading child advocacy organization and works to improve the lives and life chances of its children. Through thoughtful and informed advocacy, community education, targeted service projects and budget analysis, PCCY seeks to watch out and speak out for children and families.



PCCY undertakes specific and focused projects in areas affecting the healthy growth and development of children, including child care, public education, child health, juvenile justice and child welfare.

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