



# What School Leaders Can Do To Increase Arts Education

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**L**earning in and through the arts develops the essential knowledge, skills, and creative capacities all students need to succeed in school, work, and life. As the top building-level leaders, school principals play a key role in ensuring every student receives a high-quality arts education as part of a complete education.

In a time of shrinking budgets and shifting priorities, what can school principals do to make and keep the arts strong in their schools?

This guide offers three concrete actions school principals can take to increase arts education in their schools:

- A** establish a school-wide commitment to arts learning;
- B** create an arts-rich learning environment; and
- C** rethink the use of time and resources.

Each action is supported with several low-cost or no-cost strategies that other school leaders have used and found to be effective—whether it’s beginning an

arts program where none exists, making an existing program stronger, or preserving an arts program against future cuts. While many of the strategies are drawn from elementary schools, they are likely to be applicable in a variety of grade levels.

Mounting research evidence confirms that students in schools with arts-rich learning environments academically outperform their peers in arts-poor schools. Where the arts are an integral component of the school day, they positively impact student attendance, persistence and engagement; enhance teacher effectiveness; and strengthen parent and community involvement. Research also shows school principals serve as the primary decision makers as to whether and to what extent the arts are present within a school.

The Arts Education Partnership (AEP) prepared this guide, with support from the President’s Committee on the Arts and the Humanities (PCAH). The increasingly critical role of school leaders, along with the growing body of evidence on the benefits of arts learning, summarized most recently in a new report published by the PCAH<sup>1</sup>, prompted the development of the guide. AEP staff reviewed the relevant literature as well as conducted personal interviews with school principals and with practitioners who work closely with principals.

School principals and other leaders interested in increasing arts education in America’s schools can adopt any of these actions and strategies one at a time or implement several at once. When taken together as part of an overall approach, however, their effects are more likely to be cumulative, mutually reinforcing, and more sustainable over time.

<sup>1</sup> The President’s Committee on the Arts and the Humanities, *Reinvesting in Arts Education: Winning America’s Future Through Creative Schools*, Washington, D.C., May 2011.

# Strategies School Leaders Can Use to Increase Arts Education

## **A. Establish a School-Wide Commitment to Arts Learning**

1. Articulate clear goals
2. Identify the arts in the budget
3. Explore multiple approaches
4. Make arts learning visible
5. Engage parents

## **B. Create an Arts-Rich Learning Environment**

1. Bring the arts into daily instruction
2. Provide arts-based professional development
3. Support a school-wide arts learning community
4. Incorporate the arts into staffing and hiring decisions
5. Involve the local arts community

## **C. Rethink the Use of Time and Resources**

1. Reallocate resources
2. Tap Title I and Title II funds
3. Adjust schedules and repurpose space
4. Use after-school time
5. Build community resources

# Create an Arts-Rich Learning Environment

- 1 Bring the arts into daily classroom instruction.** As Stephen Noonan, Principal of the High School of Arts, Imagination and Inquiry in New York City puts it, “We don’t limit student experiences with art to one class or one unit; rather we find authentic ways to integrate the arts across the curriculum.” But in an already jam-packed day, some teachers might resist integrating arts learning experiences if doing so seems like an “add-on.” Peg Winkelman, a teacher educator at California State University, East Bay, suggests principals “eliminate the idea that it is difficult [to integrate the arts.] It may be there are one or two teachers who already use the arts as part of their instructional practices.” Use their expertise to spark interest among other educators.
- 2 Provide arts-based professional development.** Key to effective, high quality professional development is that it should be intensive, on-going, and aligned with state and district curriculum requirements. At some schools, the arts teachers serve as the school “lead” in providing or coordinating professional development for classroom teachers. At others, professional development support comes from outside the school, either from the school district or an arts or cultural organization. At Carnation Elementary School, Principal Doug Poage used a combination of both: “We were able to get a teacher professional development grant from the state for two years. Now, 80% of teachers are trained in using the arts. We created our replica program so that now we train our teachers using our own staff. We also use an artist in our own community, which helps the local community as well as our school.”
- 3 Support a school-wide arts learning community.** Professional development alone doesn’t provide sufficient support for creating a school-wide arts learning community that engages the entire

“To help us hire quality staff with an interest in the arts, we have interview questions related to the arts. For example, tomorrow I’m interviewing candidates for a school counselor position and the question is, At our school we use the arts to integrate and enhance our curriculum. What background or experiences do you have in the arts and how would you use the arts to enhance a school counseling program?”

**Doug Poage, Principal**  
Carnation Elementary, Carnation, Washington

staff—classroom teachers, specialist teachers, administrators, and school leaders. School principals can help build staff capacity by reinforcing the commitment to the arts through a school-wide arts theme, the sharing of arts-related books and articles and incorporating the topic into staff meetings.

- 4 Incorporate the arts into staffing and hiring decisions.** Develop job descriptions for new hires that let candidates know arts coursework or experience using the arts in teaching is an expectation. Then, follow it up by asking arts-related questions in job interviews with prospective teachers. School principals also can reinforce the emphasis on using the arts in teaching by making it a part of classroom observations, teacher discussions and the evaluation process.
- 5 Involve the local arts community.** Reaching beyond the school walls to arts and cultural organizations can produce many lasting benefits. Teaching artists—professional artists from cultural institutions or from the community—can play a key role in providing workshops, consultations, teaching demonstrations, assessment techniques and assistance in the development of curricular materials. Forming partnerships with the local arts community can help infuse the school with rich, comprehensive programs—not simply add-on experiences that can come and go with the availability of resources.

# Establish a School-Wide Commitment to Arts Learning

- 1 Articulate clear goals.** School principals play a pivotal role in articulating goals associated with a high quality and equitable arts education for every student. Richard Kessler, executive director of the Center for Arts Education in New York City, which runs an arts-based institute for principals, advises school leaders “to establish your own vision and lead the school in it.” Additionally, including the arts in the school’s improvement plan and mission statement not only plants a “stake in the ground,” it helps provide direction for the school’s allocations of time and resources.
- 2 Identify the arts in the budget.** Increasingly in most districts, principals have discretion over how priorities are set and resources allocated. Having a specific line item in the budget for the arts can contribute to ensuring a close alignment between educational goals and student learning needs. It also can help identify where there may be resource gaps and inequities and suggest ways in which they can be filled. For example, at one elementary school when it became apparent quality arts materials were lacking, school leaders decided to add a five dollar student enrollment fee to cover the costs.
- 3 Explore multiple approaches.** One size does not fit all when it comes to arts learning approaches or programs. But principals have a variety of resources they can tap to find out what might work best to advance a school’s educational goals. Among them: Talk to colleagues. Conduct research. Investigate programs. Visit schools. In the end, the range of approaches may include some combination of strategies such as hiring arts teachers, purchasing

arts supplies, or developing partnerships with arts or cultural organizations. However, the only surefire way a principal can determine what really works is by rigorously evaluating the outcomes.

- 4 Make arts learning visible.** The arts should be an integral part of what “defines” the school. Honoring students’ artistic and creative talents and achievements provides an opportunity to show what students know and can do and where arts learning outcomes fit within the school’s overall educational goals. At Agassiz Elementary School in Chicago, evidence of the learning process is hung on the school walls, using pictures, descriptions, and the students’ own writing. Principal Mira Weber says: “We do a lot of documentation of the learning process, which shows the beginning, middle, and end, not just the final product.”
- 5 Engage parents.** Parents love to see their children perform and to see students’ artwork, but when parents are actively engaged in school life they are able, and often willing, to do so much more. At some schools, parents provide the “beyond the scenes” support that can keep a program running, whether it is raising funds, writing grants, volunteer activities or even direct advocacy. “By valuing the arts and unpacking arts learning for parents, principals can lead parents and PTA members to understand that their own role is one of leadership, and that they can go to the school board and convince them to support the arts,” reports Una McAlinden, executive director of ArtsEd Washington, which runs a principals’ program for arts leadership.

**“The vision starts at the top. I have a vision for what children need. Middle school is the place where we prepare children for adulthood, and they need more than reading and math. The arts bring children together.”**

*Debra Garofalo, Principal  
Marine Park Junior High, Brooklyn, New York*

# Rethink the Use of Time and Resources

- 1 Reallocate resources.** According to Una McAlinden of ArtsEd Washington, “The schools that we work with in our Principals’ Arts Leadership program essentially don’t have any more time or money than other schools in the state, but for them it is a question of priority and equity.” For example, some principals have been able to carve out building funds for arts education or consider slightly larger class sizes to free up more resources for arts teacher positions.
- 2 Tap Title I and II funds.** Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), distributes supplemental federal aid to schools based on the number of students in poverty they enroll. In an August 2009 letter to educators and community leaders, U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan made clear that “Under ESEA, states and local school districts have the flexibility to support the arts. Title I, Part A, of ESEA funds arts education to improve the achievement of disadvantaged students.” The letter goes on to state that Title II funds, which pertain to teacher quality, “can be used for professional development of arts teachers as well as for strategic partnerships with cultural, arts and other nonprofit organizations.”

- 3 Adjust schedules and repurpose space.** Rather than covering the classroom teacher’s planning time, arts teachers should be provided an opportunity to meet with classroom teachers or teachers of other subjects to decide collaboratively how best to address the school’s educational goals or student learning needs. At some highly effective schools, principals have instituted a late start time for students one day a week so that the entire staff has planning time together. Think creatively also about the use of school space and facilities. Principal Debra Garofalo at Marine Park Junior High noted: “We had a science room with a wooden floor that we originally transformed into a dance studio, then into a black box theatre. We began theatre classes there, put in curtains, and installed track lighting. The children learned about props, make-up, and staging. We developed an entire theatre coursework.”
- 4 Use after-school time.** Integrating the arts with other subjects in after-school learning can help reinforce in-school learning. Arnold Aprill, founder and creative director of Chicago Arts Partnerships in Education, which works extensively with school leaders, suggests, “Use after-school funds to engage in-school educators in conceiving of after-school as a laboratory for developing in-school arts programming.”
- 5 Build community resources.** The better people understand the reasons for arts education, the better they can advocate for it. By being pro-active in communicating the benefits of learning in and through the arts, the principal can play a key role in marshalling support from the larger community. An arts project may be just what a local organization or community member would like to support. Sefi in-kind support—donations of musical instruments, art supplies, or computer technology—but work toward sustainable support.

*“We used Title I funds to bring in teaching artists. They work with our teachers to develop arts integrated curricula. We are building the capacity to use the arts every year, and all of this has been through Title I funds.”*

*Rhea Acosta, Principal  
Foothills Elementary, Peoria, Arizona*

# Conclusion

Taking any or all of these actions, school leaders can help students to enjoy a richer, deeper, more meaningful education without significant trade-offs in funding, personnel, or learning in other subjects. Through a variety of proven strategies, these actions are likely to bring success—for students, for educators, and for schools—that will endure well beyond any costs.

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Visit the AEP Website at [www.aep-arts.org](http://www.aep-arts.org) for references and additional resources.

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# About the Arts Education Partnership and the President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities

The Arts Education Partnership (AEP) is dedicated to securing a high quality arts education for every young person in America. A national coalition of more than 100 education, arts, cultural, government, and philanthropic organizations, AEP was created in 1995 by the National Endowment for the Arts and the U.S. Department of Education and is administered by the Council of Chief State School Officers and the National Assembly of State Arts Agencies. [www.aep-arts.org](http://www.aep-arts.org)

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