

The Role of Arts Education Programs in Post COVID-19 U.S.

Whether one becomes an artist or not, all children need to be exposed to the transformative powers of arts education. Arts education for youth can take on many forms ranging from performing arts like music, dance, and drama to visuals arts, poetry, and design. Learning a craft, its history, and how art connects to other areas of school and community are all parts of what make up a well-rounded education. So of course, arts education matters.

Children who go on to become successful adults are more likely than not to have had some arts education enrich their experiences on that path. Study after study show the correlation between arts education and academic achievement.¹ Engaging youth through the arts leads to healthier adults and to healthier communities with greater social tolerance. A large-scale randomized controlled trial of the Houston Arts Alliance youth programming that included over 10,000 third – through eighth-grade students by Brian Kisida and Daniel Bowen showed the positive impacts arts education had on improving writing, lowering disciplinary infractions, and improving compassion for others... *In terms of our measure of compassion for others, students who received more arts education experiences are more interested in how other people feel and more likely to want to help people who are treated badly.*²

Since the evidence exists that arts education matters, why are there continued plans to cut education spending on the arts and afterschool programs?³ And if we make cuts, what programs will we cut and will children living in vulnerable families get left out...again?

On top of current structural inequities and access issues that plague arts education, there has been a lot of discussion about how some people, already vulnerable, may be adversely affected by collateral damage of the COVID-19 pandemic. But as many have been pointing out lately, why does it take a pandemic to raise awareness and concerns about the inequity of arts education, when we have known all along that inequities exist? Could this time be different? Is it possible to re-set some of our priorities

¹ Aypek Arslan, A. (2014, February 24). A Study Into The Effects Of Art Education On Children At The Socialisation Process. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences Volume 116, Pages 4114-4118*. Retrieved June 2, 2020, from <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1877042814009173>

² Kisida, B., & Bowen, H. (2019, February 12). New Evidence Of The Benefits Of Arts Education. *Brookings*. Retrieved June 2, 2020, from <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/brown-center-chalkboard/2019/02/12/new-evidence-of-the-benefits-of-arts-education/>

³ Projects, E. (1970, January 1). Trump Seeks To Slash Education Budget, Combine 29 Programs Into Block Grant. *Education Week - Politics K-12*. Retrieved June 2, 2020, from <https://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/campaign-k-12/2020/02/trump-slash-education-funding-merge-block-grant-charter-schools-title-i.html>

and invest in the evidence-based efforts we know have the greatest impact on our youth? If so, it will take great leadership at the local, state, and national level for this to happen. And it will be most affected by how practitioners on the ground and their advocates perform and raise awareness to the value of arts education and the need to have equitable access to it.

Many arts education programs are doing just that and are collaborating with others to share lessons from the field like the Soulsville Foundation (Soulsville). Soulsville is a nonprofit organization and its campus sits on the original site of Stax Records in Memphis, TN. For over two decades, the Soulsville Foundation has been committed to arts education. Soulsville operates the Stax Museum of American Soul Music, the Stax Music Academy, and The Soulsville Charter School. The **Stax Museum of American Soul Music** highlights the cultural and social impact of American soul music, and receives approximately 60,000 visitors a year. Devoted to exposing area youth to the arts, it has dedicated programming targeted for the 7,000 school children who tour it annually. Internationally known as an elite music program, the **Stax Music Academy** focuses on afterschool and summer experiences that provide high-quality music instruction including performance and production training, youth development, and supports for middle and high school students. And, since 2005, a college prep school with a strong music arts emphasis, **The Soulsville Charter School**, has become one of the more desirable schools for families in the Memphis area, educating 660 in its 6th through 12th grades.

Soulsville is about preserving a legacy by creating a program and school that reflects that legacy. Stax Records lives on at the corner of E. McLemore and College Avenue in Memphis because for over twenty years its efforts have focused retrospectively examining the history of Stax Records and the unique African American art form that is soul music, while prospectively using arts education as a way to produce a new generation of artists. Of course, not every student goes on to a career in the arts, but all students who participate in the programming at Soulsville grow socially, emotionally, and academically as they make their path in the world. And, like all good arts education programs, Soulsville helps its program graduates succeed and plays a role in helping break-down barriers to provide access across economic boundaries.

Providing evidence of success like that of Soulsville and countless other programs, and collaborating with others to aggregate information and data around the impacts of arts education, could have lasting effects on government budgets at all levels.

And despite the pandemic, programs like Soulsville's Stax Music Academy and many others around the country never stopped programming and have been creating an active virtual presence over the last few months – albeit many of those programs have had to work hard to ensure both that their participants had online access, and that their staffs were trained on how to deliver safe, effective programming online. Meanwhile, the next year or so is crucial for arts education programs to stay viable so they will be available for those that need them after the pandemic. As such, it is important to continue to measure, track results, adjust, and provide good data for policy makers and others during this new hybrid programming phase.

Additionally, good arts programs also are actively taking advantage of any local, state, national, and federal funding that is being offered in the wake of the COVID-19 crisis. And, arts education programs are collaborating with other organizations to assist with families and their participants anyway they can by facilitating and providing information and updates about free Internet access opportunities, supplemental free food resources, and other helpful information, as well as making connections to mental wellness supports where possible.

As budget priorities are set, we can all be advocates for arts education and its important role in the future of our country. A handful of years ago, when my wife and I were looking around for schools for my oldest child, the first one we looked at was our local neighborhood elementary school. The tour was fine, but when I inquired about the arts, the principal told me that in light of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), the school had placed an emphasis on more math classes and less time for physical education, and no time for the arts, which was not the intention NCLB. (In fact, arts education was meant to be a component of NCLB.) The principal's theory was that parents would provide arts as a supplement after school. Obviously, that means that parents had to have resources and programs had to be available. A good program has quality instruction and it is a safe place with caring qualified adults. That is always not available or affordable in many communities around the country.

Many cities such as the aforementioned Houston Arts Alliance, and ArtsMemphis have cultural hubs that organize, collaborate, seek funding and advocate for the arts education to fill those gaps left by schools and governments. Those organizations need to be embraced and supported, not just by individuals in communities, but also by local leadership. The arts leaders need to be cabinet-level members of any mayor or governor's administration. And those leaders must work to ensure that access, affordability, and continuity of arts education programs in the schools, in the afterschool space, and during summers is mission critical. Right now we need leadership to embrace and lead the way to post-COVID arts education by ramping-back-up what works, and studying and helping evolve what we are learning in the field around online access and programming, new staggered hours availability, and mobility.

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