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Arts Instruction Still Widely Available, But Disparities Persist

By [Erik Robelen](#) on April 2, 2012 12:12 PM

Rumors of the death of arts education in public schools have been greatly exaggerated, new data suggest.

Over the past decade, the availability of music and visual arts instruction has changed little, and remains high, according to a comprehensive new [federal report](#). (Dance and theater, however, are fast becoming endangered species at the elementary level.)

At the same time, disparities persist in access to arts instruction for high-poverty schools, though in a number of specific categories, those schools have seen some improvements over time. For example, a greater share of high-poverty schools now employ visual arts specialists than a decade ago.

I've certainly heard many times the assertion that the arts have been getting squeezed out of the curriculum in recent years, amid the dual pressures of the federal No Child Left Behind Act and recession-driven declines in education spending.

But the nationally representative results made public today tell a different story.

The vast majority of public elementary schools (94 percent) offered music instruction in 2009-10, the exact same figure as a decade earlier, according to the report from the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics. Visual arts dropped just slightly, from 87 percent to 83 percent in 2009-10.

For secondary schools, music instruction was offered in 91 percent of public schools in 2008-09, up from 90 percent a decade earlier. For visual arts, there was a slight decline from 93 percent to 89 percent.

"Generally, what we really found is there is no consistent trend of decline in arts education in public schools," said Jared Cooper-Smith, a project officer at the NCES. "However, we did find various instances of change."

Most notable was the bad news for dance and drama at the elementary level, which have all but disappeared. Dance instruction dropped from 20 percent of schools in 1999-2000 to 3 percent in 2009-10. Drama/theater dropped from 20 percent to 4 percent. (In 2010, I [wrote](#) about efforts to integrate dance across the curriculum. Among my examples was a Maryland school that incorporated dance into a lesson on photosynthesis.)

At the secondary level, however, the figures were far more stable, with only slight declines, from 14 percent to 12 percent in dance, from 1999-2000 to 2008-09, and from 48 percent to 45 percent in drama/theater.

The [President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities](#) issued a statement today expressing some relief about the big picture, even while drawing attention to some troubling data within the report. This advisory panel [issued](#) a report last year that called for "reinvesting" in arts education, saying that "due to budget constraints and emphasis on the subjects of high-stakes testing, arts instruction in schools is on a downward trend." The report suggested that this trend was "especially true" for students in schools serving higher concentrations of children living in poverty.

"It is gratifying that, even in times of narrowing curriculum and economic hardships over the last decade, schools still see a strong value in access to arts education and continue to prioritize making it available to their students," the White House advisory panel said today.

At the same time, the committee highlighted "disturbing" data on the "persistence of the gap" in access to arts instruction between high- and low-poverty schools.

In looking at the federal report, I did see some differences, though they did not paint a picture of consistent disparities. Here are some examples of access differences when comparing schools with 0 to 25 percent of

students eligible for a free or reduced-price lunch (which I'll call low poverty) and those with 76 percent or more of such students (which I'll call high poverty).

Music instruction at elementary level:

- Available at least once a week

Low Poverty: 95 percent

High Poverty: 93 percent

- Offered throughout the entire school year

Low Poverty: 96 percent

High Poverty: 89 percent

- Dedicated rooms with special equipment were primary space for instruction:

Low poverty: 82 percent

High poverty: 65 percent

- Arts specialists were available

Low Poverty: 98 percent

High Poverty: 85 percent

Visual arts instruction at elementary level:

- Available at least once a week

Low poverty: 90 percent

High poverty: 84 percent

- Offered throughout the entire school year

Low poverty: 92 percent

High poverty: 83 percent

- Dedicated rooms with special equipment were primary space for instruction:

Low poverty: 76 percent

High poverty: 59 percent

- Arts specialists employed:

Low poverty: 89 percent

High poverty: 81 percent

That said, in many categories, the gap in access is closing between high- and low-poverty schools, the data suggest. For instance, over the past decade, the availability of weekly music instruction climbed from 82 percent to 93 percent in high-poverty schools, while the figure for low-poverty schools stayed the same, at 95 percent. And dedicated music rooms were available in 65 percent, up from 43 percent in 1999-2000. In fact, the availability of such dedicated rooms for visual arts instruction nearly doubled for high-poverty schools over the past decade, from 33 percent to 59 percent.

[**UPDATE:** (April 3, 2:13 p.m.) A significant—and disturbing—change I missed in my initial blog post concerns access to music and visual-arts instruction at the secondary level for high-poverty schools. It dropped from 100 percent to 81 percent in music, and from 93 percent to 80 percent in the visual arts, when comparing data for 1999-2000 with the 2008-09 school year. Oddly enough, the opposite was true at the elementary level. Access to music instruction among high-poverty schools grew from 85 percent to 89 percent, when comparing 1999-2000 with 2009-10. For visual arts, it grew from 74 percent to 80 percent.]

There's a ton of data to mine in this new federal report, and I've only scratched the surface here. So you should definitely take a closer look if the subject of arts access in schools is of interest.

I'll close by highlighting a sobering comment from the President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities about how the percentages revealed in the federal report don't tell the whole story.

"It's important to note that, according to this study, tens and tens of thousands of children in our country have little or no access to arts education in their school," the panel said. "No recorders, no drawing self-portraits, no band or school plays. Disproportionately, this number consists of our neediest students."

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