



The Arts Leading the Way to Student Success A 2020 Action Agenda for Advancing the Arts in Education

“The future belongs to young people with an education and the imagination to create.”

Barack Obama

44th President of the United States

Young people with a high quality “education and the imagination to create” hold the keys to America’s future prosperity and well-being. As a nation, we’re making measurable progress in building that future, as evidenced by the recent rise in high school graduation rates. Yet despite this good news, wide disparities in educational access and opportunity persist among different groups of students based on income, race, and ethnicity.

To ensure all young people graduate high school ready to succeed in college, career, and life, we must continue to raise the bar on our expectations for a fair and equitable education system designed to serve the learning needs of all students, regardless of background.

The Arts Education Partnership (AEP) is committed to realizing the promise of a complete and competitive education that includes the arts as an essential component for every student. AEP is a national network of more than 100 public and private organizations working in partnership through research, policy, and practice to expand access to high quality arts learning opportunities for all students, both in and out of school.

The Partnership has created *The Arts Leading the Way to Student Success: A 2020 Action Agenda for Advancing the Arts in Education* as a blueprint for systemic change and collective action. This Agenda outlines a set of goals and strategies by which the arts and education community can collectively respond to and inform high priority areas of action needed to effectively address educational inequalities, and level the playing field for academic achievement and student success.

This Agenda also establishes a five-year aspirational goal: *By the year 2020 every young person in America, at every grade level, from pre-kindergarten through grade 12, will have equitable access to high quality arts learning opportunities, both during the school day and in out-of-school time.*

A five-year span from 2015 to 2020 is significant as well for the crucial transition points it marks in a child or young person’s life. A child born in 2015 will, by 2020, likely be entering kindergarten; the eighth grader will be graduating high school; and the high school senior will be completing postsecondary education or training or already participating in the workforce. These transitions also represent points along an educational continuum whereby we can assess progress toward achievement of the Action Agenda’s aspirational goal of universal access to a quality arts education.

A word about the terms used in the Action Agenda. We use the term “*arts in education*” to emphasize that the primary focus of this agenda is on articulating the essential role and contribution of the arts *in* education improvement efforts. The term is inclusive of both the arts as a core academic subject and as integrated in other subjects and settings. It also encompasses the five disciplines for which there currently are voluntary national core arts standards: dance, media arts, music, theatre, and visual arts.

Additionally, we use the term “*arts and education leaders*” to refer to representatives of AEP partner organizations and other like-minded individuals for whom this agenda is intended. While the various missions and diverse interests of AEP partner organizations span the sectors of arts, business, culture, education, and philanthropy, their work within the Partnership aligns at the intersection of arts *and* education.

Why an Arts Education Matters

For America’s young people to be fully prepared when they leave high school for college, career, and life, they will need a complete and competitive education. They will need an education that includes deep, expansive knowledge in a broad range of subjects as well as advanced reading, writing, and computational skills. They will need the ability to think creatively and synthesize relevant information from across subject areas and combine it in new and novel ways. And they will need the ability to reason analytically, communicate effectively, and work collaboratively.

In other words, they will need the knowledge, skills, and competencies that the arts teach.

As an essential component of a complete and competitive education, the arts support academic achievement and student success, bolster skills demanded of a 21st Century workforce, and enrich the lives of young people and communities. A student who meets the rigorous standards of *artistic literacy* has acquired the knowledge and understanding needed to participate authentically in the arts and the ability to transfer that knowledge and understanding in making connections to other subjects and settings.

Decades of research compiled by AEP show time and again that students highly involved in the arts outperform students with little or no arts involvement, particularly in school settings. They receive better grades, have more positive attitudes about school, and are less likely to drop out of high school. More importantly, the differences are most significant for economically disadvantaged students.

Given the demonstrated academic, social, and personal benefits of an arts education, it’s not surprising that nearly every state in the U.S. has adopted standards for arts education and most states have policies that require public elementary and secondary schools to provide students with opportunities for direct instruction in the arts. Yet millions of students have little or no access to an arts education, according to U.S. Department of Education data.

And who are the kids with little or no access to the arts? Disproportionately, they are the students who attend high-poverty, low-performing schools. These are the schools that serve the lowest socio-economic levels of our population. Often, they are the same schools that enroll more students of color, English language learners, and those with special needs. They are also the same schools more likely to produce students who eventually leave high school before they have earned a diploma.

Students who attend high poverty schools have less access than their more affluent peers to regular weekly instruction in the arts, a standards-aligned curriculum, dedicated facilities, specialized equipment, and certified arts teachers—all familiar hallmarks of a high quality in-school arts education. Put simply, our current system of education provides the students who could benefit most from a high quality arts education with the least amount of access to it.

How the Arts Can Lead the Way to Student Success

The lack of access to an arts-rich curriculum and high quality arts learning opportunities is not an isolated problem in high poverty schools; it is in fact one symptom of larger, more systemic problems that plague such schools. Students who attend high poverty schools frequently lack access not only to the arts, but also, more broadly, to a well-rounded and challenging curriculum overall, experienced and effective teachers, and adequate educational resources and facilities.

While not a panacea for these problems, the arts are, however, an integral part of the solution in preparing all students, regardless of background, for success in college, career, and life. With a demonstrated impact on school climate and culture, strong federal and state policy environments in support of K-12 arts education, and a deep knowledge base on the benefits of arts learning for all students, the arts can lead the way in responding to and informing priorities for school improvement and student success.

This Action Agenda is focused primarily on effecting constructive change in state and local policies and practices as a means to support expanded access to quality arts learning opportunities in all schools and communities. It provides arts and education leaders with a common framework by which they can strengthen their alliances and bases of support to inform public understanding and influence political will for the arts in education. The Agenda identifies four state level priority areas in which arts and education leaders can situate their work:

- I. Raise **Student Achievement and Success**
- II. Support Effective **Educators and School Leaders**
- III. Transform the **Teaching and Learning Environment**
- IV. Build **Leadership Capacity and Knowledge**

A 2020 Action Agenda for Advancing the Arts in Education

PRIORITY AREA I. Raise Student Achievement and Success – Through the adoption of higher learning standards and the implementation of new accountability systems, states across the country are rethinking what it means for students to be ready for college, career, and life. AEP partner organizations are working to ensure the arts are integral in the deliberations and actions pertaining to higher learning expectations for all students, the systems designed for assessing growth towards those expectations, and the structures for ensuring that expectations are met.

Arts in Education Goal I – Position the arts as essential in the definition and implementation of college, career, and citizenship-ready standards and comprehensive assessment and accountability systems.

Strategies

- Incorporate learning in the arts as a part of a comprehensive definition of college, career, and citizenship readiness.
- Promote valid and reliable application of the arts in standards-based assessments of college, career, and citizenship readiness.
- Include student learning in the arts as a component of comprehensive school, district, and state accountability systems.

Indicators of Progress

- State assessment systems expand flexibility for multiple methods of assessment including assessment methods that are arts-based or incorporate the arts.
- State and local accountability systems ensure that student achievement in the arts is incorporated in measures of school success.

PRIORITY AREA II. Support Effective Educators and School Leaders – As part of the transition to higher learning standards for students, states are also rethinking their systems of preparation, support, and evaluation for educators and school leaders. AEP partner organizations are working to ensure that all levels of the educator workforce are ready and able to engage the arts as a core academic subject, as a key instructional resource across all disciplines, and as a strategy for school turnaround. For this Agenda the definition of “*educator workforce*” includes certified arts specialists, teachers of subjects other than the arts, school leaders, and community-based arts educators.

Arts in Education Goal II – Strengthen the role and contribution of the arts in the preparation and support of educators and school leaders.

Strategies

- Incorporate the arts as an essential component of all educator workforce preparation programs.
- Engage the arts as a part of high quality support and professional learning programs for the entire educator workforce.
- Support evaluation, assessment, and research to inform a process of and track progress towards continual educator improvement.

Indicators of Progress

- Educator preparation programs provide standards-based arts teaching methods and assessment tools.
- Professional learning programs support the continuous development of all educators and align with evaluation systems that authentically incorporate the arts.

PRIORITY AREA III. Transform the Teaching and Learning Environment -- States are employing a wide array of innovative approaches to personalize students’ learning experiences and transform the learning environment. AEP partner organizations are working to explore and expand arts-centered and arts-based solutions and strategies for using time, resources, and technology in new and innovative ways to ensure the learning environment supports student success for all children and young people.

Arts in Education Goal III – Leverage innovations in the education environment with arts-based and arts-integrated teaching and learning strategies that meet student needs.

Strategies

- Leverage research, policy, and practice to expand the opportunities for and effectiveness of arts learning in student-centered teaching and learning.
- Articulate the role and contribution of the arts for transforming the climate and culture of low performing schools.
- Identify, support, and promote the effective use of technologies and media across all teaching and learning environments.
- Promote opportunities for high quality arts-based and arts-integrated expanded learning opportunities (ELOs) that align with goals for college, career, and citizenship readiness.

Indicators of Progress

- Student-centered learning initiatives ensure equal access to arts education for all students.
- The arts are engaged as an integral aspect of school improvement efforts.
- Expanded learning opportunities (ELOs) engage arts and arts-integrated programming to address state and local goals for college, career, and citizenship readiness.

PRIORITY AREA IV. Build Leadership Capacity and Knowledge – To carry out the work outlined in the Action Agenda, state, local, and national arts and education leaders need easy access to a wide range of timely, useful, and accurate information that can support their efforts. AEP partner organizations are working to ensure that all arts and education policy leaders as well as other key stakeholders and decisionmakers have the knowledge and resources needed to engage the arts as an essential component of a complete and competitive education for all students.

Arts in Education Goal IV – Equip state, national, and local arts and education leaders with the knowledge, skills, and capabilities to effectively incorporate the arts as an integral component in education improvement efforts.

Strategies

- Engage and build relationships with key arts and education stakeholders invested in education improvement.
- Identify existing and develop new resources on the role and contribution of arts in education to inform education improvement efforts.
- Disseminate and support the effective use of tools and resources to inform education improvement efforts.

Indicators of Progress

- New resources on arts in education target the identified needs of arts and education stakeholders.
- Arts in education strategies and approaches are an integral part of education improvement discussions and initiatives.

The Way Forward

The arts are an essential part of a complete and competitive education for *all* students, regardless of where they live or go to school. The Arts Education Partnership is committed to ensuring that every young person in America has an opportunity to create, perform, experience, and learn about the arts in all their many forms. *The Arts Leading the Way to Student Success: A 2020 Action Agenda for Advancing the Arts in Education* provides arts and education leaders and other like-minded stakeholders with a blueprint for collective action and systemic change. It establishes an ambitious set of goals and strategies that articulates the role and contribution of the arts in education improvement efforts.

This Action Agenda is founded in AEP's belief that all students need and deserve the chance to reach their fullest learning potential in and through the arts, to leave high school as an artistically literate citizen, and to be comprehensively prepared to succeed in college, career, and life. Indeed, the future prosperity and well-being of our nation, in fact, may depend on it.

About the Arts Education Partnership (AEP): Established in 1995 through a unique interagency agreement between the National Endowment for the Arts and the U.S. Department of Education, AEP is a national network of organizations dedicated to advancing the arts in education through research, policy, and practice. AEP's vision is for every student in America to succeed in school, work, and life as a result of a high quality education in and through the arts. For more information, visit the AEP website at www.aep-arts.org.

The 25 AEP Advisory Committee and Other Lead Partner Organizations that Participated in the Development of the 2020 Action Agenda: Americans for the Arts; Arts Education Collaborative; Association of Art Museum Directors; Big Thought; College Board; Council of Chief State School Officers; Dance USA; Education Policy and Leadership Center; Educational Theatre Association; John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts; League of American Orchestras; Lesley University; Local Learning: The National Network for Folk Arts in Education; National Art Education Association; National Assembly of State Arts Agencies; National Association for Music Education; National Dance Education Organization; National Endowment for the Arts; National Guild for Community Arts Education; North Carolina A+ Schools; OPERA America; State Education Agencies Directors of Arts Education; U.S. Department of Education; WolfTrap Foundation for the Performing Arts; Young Audiences Arts for Learning. **Bolded names** indicate organizations whose leaders served as Chairs or Vice-Chairs of the Action Agenda Working Groups.

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