

SUCCESS STORY: An Organizational Pivot Brings Arts Kits and Meals to Students' Homes



COVID-19 Innovations and Responses

This is the sixth in a series of success stories detailing innovations by arts education organizations in response to pandemic-related closures and modifications.

About AEP Success Stories

The Arts Education Partnership at Education Commission of the States is a national network of more than 100 organizations dedicated to advancing arts education. AEP has been supported by the National Endowment for the Arts and the U.S. Department of Education since 1995 and is administered by Education Commission of the States. AEP is the nation’s hub for arts and education leaders, building their leadership capacity to support students, educators and learning environments. Through research, reports, convenings and counsel, leaders gain knowledge and insights to ensure that all learners — especially those that have historically been marginalized — receive an excellent arts education. To achieve its goal to expand access to high-quality arts learning opportunities for all learners, AEP gathers detailed information on success stories with the potential to be replicated in communities across the country.

The Success Stories project collects submissions from organizations that highlight successful arts education programs. These stories demonstrate the benefits of arts integration across the education spectrum and promote continued collaboration and learning for individuals and organizations working toward student achievement and success.

In 2021, AEP added a fifth priority area to success stories to capture innovations by partners and affiliates in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. This success story highlights the work of Artportunity Knocks. This success story aligns with AEP’s new priority area: “COVID-19 Innovations and Responses.”

Arts Education Partnership staff interviewed Ty Woods, executive director of [Artportunity Knocks](#) about [STEAM n’ Meals](#), a new program created to deliver meals and arts activity kits to students during the pandemic stay-at-home order.

SUCCESS STORY: An Organizational Pivot Brings Arts Kits and Meals to Students' Homes

Interview

Please describe the innovation(s) you're sharing.

A recent [Cobb in Focus article](#) highlights four new programs Artportunity Knocks created in response to the pandemic in 2020: [Learning Pods](#), Beatknocks Conferences, [Online Academy](#) and [STEAM n' Meals](#). This story focuses on the development and implementation of STEAM n' Meals, a program that delivers meals, art kits and activities to children in their homes.

What were the precipitating factors that led you to do things differently?

COVID-19 forced students to abruptly transition to learning from home, and we no longer had access to work with them directly through our afterschool programs in the community and partnerships with local schools. The switch to remote learning pushed us to get creative in reaching our students and meeting their needs. In person, we always provided meals and snacks to our students. For some students, staying home for the entire day meant less access to food during the pandemic. We saw a need and acted quickly to address it. Shortly after the stay-at-home order, we learned the state was looking for providers to serve food during the pandemic and that they had funding to assist. This sparked our idea to start a program that could keep people working and address food security needs of our students.

Who did you need to get involved, and were those relationships you already had or ones you had to build?

Launching STEAM n' Meals felt like a grand pivot in our programming. We launched STEAM n' Meals to get kids enriched and happy with healthy snacks, lunches prepared by local restaurants and art kits that included all necessary supplies in goodie bags provided with state funding. As of March 2021, we served more than 113,143 meals and provided over 7,000 arts kits.

As an afterschool program provider, we were already state approved to provide snacks and suppers for kids in our afterschool program. We saw that need years ago when kids would be in drama class with their stomachs growling. It's hard to reach enrichment goals if students are not having their physiological needs met.

We started serving food six years ago. When the pandemic hit, the state opened their summer food service program. This provided a wider reach to serve students beyond just kids enrolled in class, allowing us to serve any kid in a specific radius we could reach. We quickly applied to be a sponsor, and our unique home delivery component helped us stand out.

SUCCESS STORY: An Organizational Pivot Brings Arts Kits and Meals to Students' Homes

Partnerships were key for this program to work. We partnered with restaurants that already had the staff, kitchen and catering vans to pull this food delivery off. We asked the Department of Early Care and Learning (Bright from the Start) if we could partner with restaurants, and they approved the idea. This opened a world of possibilities for other restaurants to get involved, and we became a phenomenon!

Restaurants started competing to be a provider for our STEAM n' Meals program. We gave them suggestions to add a coupon in goodie bags to increase their business. We were proud to be able to help the restaurant industry in our community, which was hit hard during the pandemic. We used several restaurants and were pleasantly surprised by how many wanted to get involved. We even had to create a review process to manage the demand and a customer service review process so families could notify us if something was missing or spoiled, or if they were going to be out of town so we could adjust the delivery.

This was a whole new world of managing new logistics for our team. Being a summer food contractor for multiple sites was a lot compared to the in-house afterschool program we were used to running, but it was all worth it! We are so proud to have served around 113,143 meals as of March 2021. That is a lot of food to distribute as an arts organization. We saw a need and stepped in to fill it, even though it required us to get outside of our comfort zone. This program also allowed our instructors to curate special content for the arts activities that you won't see anywhere else.

A lot of funders allowed grantees to re-allocate funds to meet new needs. In our case, we were granted flexibility to change the scope of what funds originally dedicated to our afterschool arts program covered, provided we report out how funds were used in the end. Once funders saw how we were repurposing their funds, they were impressed, and we ended up securing more funding to increase our capacity for STEAM n' Meals. I didn't realize how innovative this was. We were the only ones in the state of Georgia doing it this way. We took our lemons and made lemonade.

We were impacted financially and lost 30% of our staff as a result of the pandemic. Since schools were not open, our afterschool programs based in schools were not bringing in income. We had to do layoffs. Once we came up with this program, we were able to bring back 70% of staff plus four new full-time positions including a marketing director, director of finance, executive assistant and office assistant. Schools have already reached out to put arts enrichment back in their afterschool programs as hybrid and in-person learning ramps up.

We didn't do this alone, and we couldn't have done this alone. Volunteers helped pack bags, put together art kits and organized materials. We bought supplies in bulk and packed them into baggies by hand along with lessons for the kids to use with their art supplies. We even

SUCCESS STORY: An Organizational Pivot Brings Arts Kits and Meals to Students' Homes

bought gallons of paint and had volunteers help pour paint into one-ounce containers. Our office became an assembly line with college students and high school students helping. We provided free masks, hand sanitizer, face shields and gloves to keep everyone safe, and we did our best to maintain physical distance.

Our partnerships with the Department of Early Care and Learning (Bright from the Start), local restaurants and community members made this program possible. We even got attention from Lyft to potentially partner, but we couldn't get it off the ground. At the time they were experiencing driver shortages, so we moved forward with using the restaurants' catering drivers.

What barriers did you encounter, and how did you deal with them?

Initially, taking on something brand new was the biggest barrier. We had never delivered anything before and had to learn to manage a whole new set of logistics. It was a headache. We also had to learn about the state's requirements for this program. Everything was moving and changing so fast. The learning curve was a challenge.

Also, the ambiguity of not knowing what's next was, and still is, difficult. Staff and participants have questions about how long we will be able to provide the meals and services. Not having an answer for them is tough, as well as having no idea when we will be returning to in-person programming.

Navigating staff bandwidth and morale was another challenge. We addressed staff morale with nearly constant communication to keep everyone informed of what we knew. I tried to be as transparent as possible, even with news I know staff didn't want to hear. The team knew if something was going on, I would tell them the truth. At one point we were worried we might have to prepare for a two-week furlough due to payroll issues. Our auditors put some holds on our accounts due to questions about our work because it was hard to believe our small organization had served so many meals. Once they audited operations and saw for themselves how we were pulling it off, everything was resolved, and we avoided having to furlough. We also got a round of funding from the Small Business Administration for emergency disaster relief that made a huge difference. If we hadn't received that support, we would have had to miss payroll for a full month.

If you could go back in time and do this again, what would you do differently (if anything)?

I would bring in additional help sooner. I waited too long before looking for help from volunteers and hiring new roles to meet our increased capacity needs. It was extremely overwhelming at times, but we didn't want to quit. Pushing through was worth it.

SUCCESS STORY: An Organizational Pivot Brings Arts Kits and Meals to Students' Homes

Is there anything else you'd like to share?

We could not have done this without our rock star team! Our staff and volunteers were outstanding and incredibly flexible in such an ambiguous and drastically changing environment. The vendors were also energized and flexible; many would adjust on a short notice to any requests for changes in delivery schedules and other logistics. We could not have done this without our amazing team and partnerships!