

SUCCESS STORY: Cathedral Arts Project Leverages Relationships to Support Innovation



COVID-19 Innovations and Responses

This is the third 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, affiliates and others in AEP’s network in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. This success story highlights the work of Cathedral Arts Project in Jacksonville, Florida. This success story aligns with AEP’s new priority area: “COVID-19 Innovations and Responses.”

Arts Education Partnership interviewed Allison Galloway-Gonzalez, chief program officer at the [Cathedral Arts Project](#) in Jacksonville, Florida. Allison is also the executive director of [Any Given Child Jacksonville](#).

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Interview

Please describe the changes your organization made to respond to the pandemic.

The Cathedral Arts Project (CAP) is a multidisciplinary arts organization that provides arts learning in community spaces where students need them the most. Because of COVID, we had to change our programs for the virtual space or put in the work to ensure safety in person. Ours is a story about how the organization is set up to be able to change and innovate quickly.

CAP is well-established and has grown from a Saturday dance program to providing more than 30 year-long programs across Duval County. We run programs in spaces like local public schools, community centers and jails, and we also do advocacy work.

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

A few years ago, we found ourselves focused on growth and answering questions about how we could grow without losing substance. We started to create a model that would allow us to shift without reducing quality, so we were already equipped to change on quick notice. One critical piece of this new model was transitioning from hiring part-time teaching artists for afterschool programs to hiring full-time employees. We wanted to focus on creating professional educators, so that meant teaching artists weren't with CAP as a second or third job. The students would always be their first work priority.

When pandemic-related shutdowns started in spring 2020, we didn't have access to the locations where we hold our programs, and we also couldn't safely convene to advocate. We had to figure out how to continue those opportunities in other ways. We had three full-time teaching artists, including a brand-new art therapist. Having these staff members on board meant we could wrap our arms around staff and work through solutions together. We've built a people-first culture, so our first instincts were safety, protecting people and maintaining jobs. We were able to engage employees in innovation because their safety was taken care of; we could look for opportunities rather than worrying about threats.

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

Most of the relationships we had to activate already existed. We had a close relationship with the local school district; in fact, the superintendent is on the CAP board. The superintendent prioritized the arts in the district's switch to virtual learning. The district's

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arts supervisor was part of a group of about 20 high-level administrators who were guiding decisions about what would happen next.

When schools closed, we realized that arts classrooms were well-equipped, but homes – the new classrooms – weren't. At the beginning, the district was concerned with getting technology to families so students could continue learning at home, so we recognized a need to help supply families with what they needed to support arts learning. One of our funders had provided a grant that was tied to our advocacy work. We went to them and asked for a change in the funding agreement to focus on getting art materials to homes. Our local art supply store was going out of business right around this time. They put together art kits, and we went back to the district and asked them how we could distribute those kits to homes. The district was using buses to distribute lunches and laptops; we coordinated with that effort. CAP staff also drove around and hung kit bags on mailboxes.

We also leveraged existed relationships to find new spaces. At this point, the CAP String Orchestra has returned to in-person learning and is following strict safety measures, but our usual rehearsal site isn't available. A local organization, [The Ritz Theatre and Museum](#), isn't open right now; they've donated their lobby to host Saturday rehearsals for the orchestra.

Finally, we didn't have the technology relationships we needed at the beginning. We do have an IT company that supports us, but there was no one to teach us to use Zoom or Google Classroom. We were fortunate that our full-time teaching artists were willing to pivot from working on curriculum to learning tech, and they taught each other tips and tricks to not only become effective, but to thrive as virtual educators.

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

Some people view arts education as beneficial but not essential. When the world is in crisis, everyone immediately thinks about essentials like making sure people have food and housing. Those are important; people need them to stay alive. But people's souls are dying, too. I wasn't sure if the superintendent or families were going to care about arts education when their children couldn't physically participate in our programs at their schools. In the end, that wasn't the case, and students still participated when we moved to host our programs online.

Another barrier was that most donors were donating to food banks and health care rather than providing new funding for arts education. Luckily, we were able to leverage existing funding in new ways by asking our funders for flexibility.

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

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We would have started preparing in January when we first started to hear about the virus, and we would have set up more emergency planning at the very beginning. CAP has a hurricane plan – it's Florida, after all – but that's not the plan we needed for this emergency. The core of our institution is going to other sites, so we needed a plan for what should happen if we couldn't do that.

We've all been talking about how we went into survival mode and have not been taking care of ourselves. CAP was like the mother who lifted a car: She saved her children, but she needed emergency care to address her injuries. We continued to provide programs for children, but now we need to build in rituals of self-care and care for others to recover from this trauma.

Where are you now, and what's in store for the future?

I've been reflecting on how good we're getting at this new way of operating. I feel like we're just getting in a groove, and now it's almost at the end of the school year. We've been reflecting on what we've learned and asking questions about what we carry with us into the future. For example, we've had parent and family engagement like never before. Children could participate in multiple art forms for the first time because in the past, each site hosted a different art form. We had out-of-state participants in programs for the first time. We had a theatre student whose family moved to Japan, and that student can still interact with their classmates and teachers.

We've been asking: What does our program look like when our choices are different? We know we need to go back to in-person learning, but we also need to keep some virtual component to engage more people. We've also experienced stronger relationships among staff and partners. We don't want to turn off the "innovation tap" that COVID started.

What else did you want to share?

In hindsight, the funders who supported this innovation trusted CAP to make decisions about what would best support the needs of our students. I don't want to see that trust go away.