

ARTS EDUCATION,

DURABLE SKILLS AND

WORKFORCE SUCCESS

Rapid changes to technology, economic uncertainty, environmental changes and political and social polarization are transforming our society and [workforce needs](#) every day. At the same time, schools are tasked with preparing students for life and work in an increasingly uncertain future. But while the future seems less certain than ever, experts predict that durable skills will outlast these [drivers of change](#).

[Durable skills](#) refer to the set of skills that inform how you use what you know and the character skills that inform how you engage with others. These differ from “hard skills” or “technical skills” that are skills and abilities associated with specific disciplines or industries, such as data analysis, information technology (IT) or finance. Durable skills include capabilities that aren’t easily accomplished through technology alone like creativity, empathy, complex problem solving, communication and collaboration, critical thinking and adaptability. These are sometimes referred to as 21st century skills, soft skills, essential skills, employability skills or human skills. Regardless of the terminology used, they are at the forefront of what the labor market demands for the future.



Arts education offers authentic opportunities for students to develop these critical [skills](#). Arts educators and community arts organizations have discussed and documented benefits of arts programming for students around these skills for decades. The demands of our changing workforce necessitate a reexamination of how arts education encourages the development of durable skills that support young people in work and life. With support from the [Music Man Foundation](#), this report offers an analysis of the connections among durable skills, arts education skills and workforce pathways, as well as policy considerations for state and district leaders to explore.

## CHANGES TO THE WORKFORCE

Educators are preparing students for college and careers in a society where [transformation](#) will reshape the global labor market by 2030. With the rise of artificial intelligence (AI), many technical skills such as [data entry and analysis](#) will be [augmented or automated](#). Broadening digital access is expected to drive both the fastest growing and fastest declining careers, however this is expected to have a complimentary impact on the value of creative skills. Susan Riley asserts that future success belongs to those who know how to use creativity alongside new tools to drive innovation, and advances in technology do not diminish the importance of creativity but “expands the canvas for human imagination”.<sup>1</sup>

In an [analysis](#) of 76 million U.S. job postings in 2023 and 2024, employers requested durable skills in 76% of jobs, with nearly half asking for three or more. The urgency for upskilling and reskilling of the labor market is underscored by the prediction that 39% of workers’ existing skills will be outdated from 2025 to 2030. An expected rise in the demand for creative thinking, resiliency, flexibility and curiosity will complement the

rise in AI and data-related skills over this same period. As our world becomes more complex, disrupted and interconnected, [schools and employers](#) alike will need to look beyond what has worked in the past and imagine a new future.

## THE CREATIVE WORKFORCE

The skills arts education teaches support well-paying and in-demand jobs both in and outside of the arts sector. [Data](#) from the Bureau of Economic Analysis and the National Endowment for the Arts show that in 2023, the arts contributed \$1.2 trillion to the U.S. economy, or 4.2% of U.S. GDP. From 2022 to 2023, the arts’ economic value grew by 6.6% —more than twice the rate of the total economy. The arts also supported 5.4 million wage-and-salary workers, for total compensation of \$553.9 billion. While many arts organizations across the country have experienced [revenue uncertainty](#), the share of earned to contributed revenue within nonprofit arts organizations had stabilized and returned to pre-pandemic levels as of 2024 and arts attendance continued to grow.

<sup>1</sup> Riley, Susan M. *Creativity’s edge: Unleashing humanity’s greatest advantage in the age of AI*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2026.

Recent projections by O\*Net have favored many arts occupations as “bright outlook careers.”

[Bright outlook careers](#) meet at least one of three criteria:

- Higher-than-average (5%+) growth projections over the next decade
- 75,000 or more projected new job openings from 2024–34
- Status as a new and emerging career

Among these include careers in the arts such as [art](#) and [music](#) therapists, [choreographers](#), [costume attendants](#), [curators](#), [entertainers and performers](#) and [talent directors](#).



The South Carolina Arts Commission established the [Creative Careers Studio](#) to support college and career readiness for high school students. This resource includes examples of creative careers with information about average salaries, required education level and advice from professional artists to those who are interested in entering their field. The resource includes a quiz to identify creative careers that match student interest and information about higher education programs and resources to support planning.

## THE BENEFITS OF ARTS EDUCATION

Arts education includes learning in and through the arts to build technical skills, creative thinking and durable skills. It includes but is not limited to dance, media arts, music, theatre, visual arts and folk and traditional arts. [High-quality arts](#) education can serve multiple purposes: it builds skills in arts disciplines, fosters creativity, provides perspective to understand the world and offers opportunities to engage with communities and social issues. It supports [essential career skills](#) like observation, problem-solving, innovation,

critical thinking, communication, collaboration and builds work ethic. Learning in the arts can also physically alter [neural pathways](#) that allow for new connections and cognitive flexibility.

The Hewlett Foundation defined [ten dimensions of powerful arts education](#) grounded in findings from arts education researchers and expert practitioners. The groups’ insights gained further depth and support from interviews with arts education leaders and participants, including young people, youth mentors,

alumni, teaching artists, program managers and executive directors of arts organizations. Many of the dimensions align with durable skills such as creativity, self-discovery, voice and storytelling, collaboration and mutual learning, belonging, leadership, agility and relevancy. Each dimension includes examples of what this learning looks, feels and sounds like in arts spaces, including:

- Ongoing, dynamic individual and group reflection
- High energy and activity with people communicating, asking questions and sharing ideas, in between moments of deep listening
- Young people expressing their emotions and experiences through artmaking while empathizing with others
- Young people accessing technology to share their stories and artwork digitally to reach global audiences
- Problem-solving and small collaborations that serve as practice for larger collaborations
- Young people forming mentorship relationships with experts in their communities, and sharing their expertise with community members

The list of experiences is extensive and illustrates the development of durable skills.

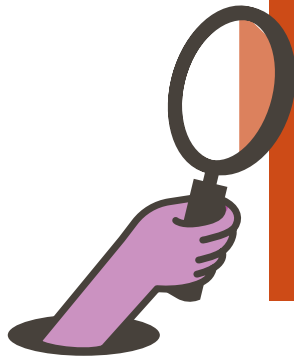
There are also distinct benefits to engaging in the arts in community settings. The [Wallace Foundation](#) describes the benefits to be both relational and opportunity-based, and the benefits arise from the interplay of young peoples' interests, relationships and opportunities. The occupational benefits of community arts

programs include short-term and long-term employment in arts programs, exposure to career pathways, pre-professional development and connections to careers in non-arts work. A vast majority (94%) of [interviewees](#) in one study indicated that participating in community arts programs helped prepare them for the workforce.

## EXAMINING IN-DEMAND DURABLE SKILLS ALONGSIDE ARTS EDUCATION SKILLS

The most in-demand durable skills and associated competencies converge with the arts education artistic processes and anchor standards in the [National Arts Standards](#). All [50 states and the District of Columbia](#) have adopted arts standards for elementary and secondary education, with many adopting directly or adapting the national standards to their state contexts.

The arts standards for all disciplines are grounded in common artistic processes—creating, performing/presenting/producing, responding and connecting—with anchor standards to inform performance standards in each discipline for all age levels. The [anchor standards](#) describe the general knowledge and skills students should demonstrate and are parallel across disciplines. These standards give critical insight into how arts education converges with the development of durable skills. The following charts include examples and synthesis of how arts learning supports the development of high-demand durable skills.



**NOTE TO READER:**

These charts are intended to offer a starting place for discussing convergence between arts education skills and durable skills and is not inclusive of all the ways artistic processes support durable skills. Many of the durable skills listed reflect multiple stages of the artistic process. We invite you to consider your own examples and connections.

**Creating:** Conceiving and developing new artistic ideas and work.

**Anchor Standard #1:** Generate and conceptualize artistic ideas and work.

**Anchor Standard #2:** Organize and develop artistic ideas and work.

**Anchor Standard #3:** Refine and complete artistic work.

**Durable skill**

**Arts Education Example**

Creativity

- Imagination
- Memory
- Emotion
- Experimentation
- Observation

Students use imagination, memory, emotion, observation and experimentation to generate artistic ideas and work.

Motivation and engagement

- Setting goals and understanding values
- Positive reframing and self-compassion
- Resiliency and perseverance

Students develop artistic goals and vision to drive creative choices and decision making. They are driven by their own values, ideas and confidence.

Problem Solving

- Understand patterns
- Experiment with new strategies
- Brainstorm new ideas
- Test prototypes
- Implement new processes
- Agility to learn and implement new ways of working

In performance settings, students are often faced with unexpected challenges, and they quickly solve real-time problems to reach the desired outcome. In visual arts settings, students test multiple options for achieving their intended product and practice multiple approaches throughout their process.

**Performing/Presenting/Producing:** Realizing artistic ideas and work through interpretation and presentation.

**Anchor Standard #4:** Select, analyze and interpret artistic work for presentation.

**Anchor Standard #5:** Develop and refine artistic techniques and work for presentation.

**Anchor Standard #6:** Convey meaning through the presentation of artistic work.

**Durable skill**

**Arts Education Example**

Collaboration

- Establishing shared goals
- Openness to ideas of others
- Practicing communication skills
- Accountability and follow through
- Conflict management
- Creating environments where others are respected and included
- Delegating
- Building trust

Students work with others to develop creative work for presentation through ideation, development and sharing. This often involves ensemble work that is built on trust, communication and shared goals.

Communication

- Active listening
- Asking clarifying questions
- Build relationships
- Demonstrate understanding
- Openness
- Confidence

Students build understanding of other artists by asking open-ended questions to understand artistic intent. They communicate their own ideas verbally, physically, musically or through visual and digital mediums. They gain confidence in their skills to communicate their ideas.

**Responding:** Understanding and evaluating how the arts convey meaning.

**Anchor Standard #7:** Perceive and analyze artistic work.

**Anchor Standard #8:** Interpret intent and meaning in artistic work.

**Anchor Standard #9:** Apply criteria to evaluate artistic work.

**Durable skill**

**Arts Education Example**

Resiliency

- Learned behaviors around adapting to adversity
- Emotional regulation
- Self-care
- Managing stress
- Recovering from difficult experiences
- Adaptability and flexibility
- Embrace change

The process of receiving feedback from peers and educators is routinely practiced in arts spaces. It can be deeply personal, and students learn how to regulate and manage their own emotions during the process. They manage setbacks by remaining open, flexible and adaptable.

Self-awareness

- Monitoring internal emotions and thoughts
- Understanding how thoughts influence behaviors
- Reflection on strengths and opportunities for growth
- Understanding goals and values

Students use personal ideas and preferences to create original work. They connect their thoughts to artistic goals and iteratively reflect on areas for improvement throughout the creative process.

**Connecting:** Relating artistic ideas and work with personal meaning and external context.

**Anchor Standard 10:** Synthesize and relate knowledge and personal experiences to make art.

**Anchor Standard 11:** Relate artistic ideas and works with societal, cultural and historical context to deepen understanding.

**Durable skill**

**Arts Education Example**

Problem Solving

- Problem solving
- Understand patterns
- Experiment with new strategies
- Brainstorm new ideas
- Test prototypes
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In performance settings, students are often faced with unexpected challenges, and they quickly solve real-time problems to reach the desired outcome. In visual arts settings, students test multiple options for achieving their intended product and practice multiple approaches throughout their process.

Empathy

- Curiosity and open-mindedness
- Responding with compassion
- Perspective-taking
- Emotional regulation
- Challenge prejudice
- Listen to understand problems
- Create safety

Students engaging with the arts consider the ideas and perspectives of others. They become curious about other ways of thinking and develop strategies to work with others.

Critical Thinking

- Analytical thinking
- Identify problems
- Assess relevant information and inferring possible solutions
- Organize conclusions
- Communicate
- Evaluation

Students deepen their understanding of societal, cultural and historical contexts through examining, performing and creating artistic works. Each arts discipline is highly reflective on how to improve practice and has unique approaches to engage in critical feedback and evaluation.

## BARRIERS

While individual programs, schools and districts have found success in aligning the arts and career-connected learning, barriers persist in enabling these efforts state-wide. States vary in their flexibility around seat-time and instructional requirements for students across content areas. What is taught and how it is taught is heavily influenced by standardized tests. Educators are stretched thin with fewer resources to meet growing requirements, and many lack access to necessary professional development [opportunities](#) for integrating arts learning. Aligning durable skills and arts education pathways requires [coherency](#) across a statewide vision, resources and flexibility to align educators, communities and leadership.

New federal law has also made significant changes to how federal funds can be used to support higher education, which has influenced how many states administer funds to specific programs. For example, states like [Indiana](#) and [Utah](#) have enacted

reforms and legislation that redirect public investments in state programs to eliminate degree programs in the arts and other areas identified as low-earning and underperforming. The intention of these efforts is to invest in “high-wage” careers, however it is unclear how the [impact](#) of the arts on the economy and the multi-faceted ways that artists earn income—including gig work, art sales, grants, residencies and teaching artistry—are accounted for in these decisions.

Lastly, long-term career success related to arts education and durable skills requires a focus on outcomes that can be difficult or costly to measure. Program evaluations typically do not account for long-term outcomes for specific participants. Program leaders may consider opportunities to engage alumni as storytellers and advocates for long-term career success, but evaluation remains a significant barrier for many schools and programs.

## POLICY CONSIDERATIONS

State policy is an important lever to address these barriers and support the connection of arts education, durable skills and workforce pathways. The policy considerations below are examples of how education leaders can ensure maximum reach and benefit for students in their states.

### DEVELOP PORTRAIT OF A GRADUATE FRAMEWORKS

[Portrait of a Graduate](#) (POG) frameworks, sometimes referred to as profile of a graduate frameworks, are vision documents at the school, district or state level that articulate a shared vision of student success. They serve to align instruction, policy and community expectations for schools. They can elevate competencies across subject areas and postsecondary pathways.

A recent [analysis](#) of 272 district level portraits across 36 states revealed that in-demand durable skills requested by job postings were cited in more than 95% of portraits. Some of the [most common skills](#) and competencies in the frameworks include:

- Critical thinking and problem solving
- Social awareness
- Communication skills
- Self-management skills
- Collaboration
- Creativity and innovation

Additionally, [20 states](#) and the District of Columbia have adopted statewide portraits, and more are in the process of developing new frameworks. States like North Carolina have used the POG framework to design [professional learning](#) opportunities to explore how the arts can be leveraged to support outcomes in the identified competencies.

Despite increased adoption of POG frameworks at the state and district levels, few portraits include guidance for implementation, measurement strategies and developmental milestones. Alignment with graduation requirements, accountability systems and funding can ensure that adoption of the frameworks is consistent across districts. [Partnerships](#) with business and industry leaders can also ensure that the responsibility for implementation is shared across communities and not just on schools or individual educators.

## UTAH



In 2018, the Utah State Board of Education led a stakeholder engagement process to inform the development of the [Utah Portrait of a Graduate Framework](#). The Framework not only identifies characteristics, skills and competencies that should be cultivated in schools but also includes rubrics that identify learning progressions across grade bands. The rubrics can be used by students to assess their skills and knowledge and are intended to be adopted by schools to align with their local school districts.

## NEVADA



The Nevada Department of Education created the [Portrait of a Nevada Learner](#) and associated rubrics in 2025 to establish a collective vision of the future-ready mindsets and skills necessary for Nevada students. The portraits were co-designed with learners, educators, families, businesses and community members to imagine the future of learning and how to make the portrait actionable. The portrait is learner-centered and frames academic knowledge as the foundation from which students can apply durable skills such as collaboration, relationships, communication, empowerment, resilience and empathy.

## ADOPT COMPETENCY-BASED AND PERSONALIZED LEARNING

[Competency-based and personalized learning](#) are common components of POG frameworks and can provide a foundation for students to develop skills in ways that best meet their individual needs. This approach is grounded in student agency and ensures that learners receive tailored support to achieve learning outcomes based on real world relevance. It prepares students for future success in a changing landscape by sharing ownership for student success across educators, families and communities.

While implementation of competency-based and personalized learning often occurs at the school and district levels, state leaders can consider [a comprehensive set of policies](#) to enable this kind of learning across districts. These policies often address instructional time, graduation pathways, waivers and funding.

### NORTH CAROLINA



The North Carolina Department of Public Instruction has developed four pillars to serve as a [framework](#) for implementing personalized learning: learning profiles, individualized learning paths, competency-based progression and flexible learning environments. Each pillar includes descriptions and guides for schools and districts to use in implementation. The state also developed a planning matrix for district leaders to analyze each of the four pillars to inform decision-making. The matrix includes considerations for learning, teaching and capacity within schools.

### KENTUCKY



Kentucky established the [Innovative Learning Network](#) as a partnership between local school districts and the state education agency to provide a professional learning space for educators focused on personalized learning. The network provides opportunities to engage across districts to share innovative strategies and practices and provides access to grant funding to support travel to model sites and programs. The Kentucky Department of Education provides ongoing technical assistance to network participants through virtual and in-person meetings and establishes connections to national leaders and resources to support innovation.

## IMPLEMENT CAREER-CONNECTED AND APPLIED LEARNING

Applied learning is an [educational approach](#) where students learn through real-world learning and by applying knowledge and skills to direct experiences. This is an important element of career-connected learning that helps students prepare for college and careers through real work experiences. Career and technical education (CTE) is a model for students to develop workforce skills while earning a high school diploma. High quality CTE programs [support students'](#) long term employment and economic mobility while also helping to increase graduation rates.

In 2024, [Advance CTE](#) updated the National Career Clusters Framework. The framework provides a structure and shared language for CTE program design to serve as a bridge between education and work. Included in the framework is the Arts, Entertainment and Design cluster which includes careers like:

- Design and digital arts
- Fashion and interiors
- Fine arts
- Lighting and sound technology
- Media production and broadcasting
- Performing arts

These programs can help connect students to arts careers and can also serve as a pathway for developing durable skills that support careers outside of the arts.

### CALIFORNIA



California is in the process of updating Career and Technical Education Model Curriculum Standards to align with the Advance CTE National Career Clusters Framework. The framework is the foundation for CTE programs in every state and works to ensure that California's CTE programs are aligned to current workforce needs.

While the standards overall will be updated in phases, the Arts, Entertainment & Design [Model Curriculum Standards](#) have been approved by the State Board of Education. These standards outline the knowledge, skills and competencies that contribute to career and college readiness within this career cluster. They are designed to promote interdisciplinary learning and encourage students to make connections across different fields. The standards also provide guidance for instruction within each career pathway for CTE educators and can be a model for other states pursuing similar updates.

## ESTABLISH APPRENTICESHIP PROGRAMS ALIGNED WITH WORKFORCE NEEDS

[Apprenticeships](#) are programs that combine paid job training with classroom instruction to prepare students and workers for careers. The U.S. Department of Labor [reports](#) that completing an apprenticeship program yields higher than average starting salaries, greater employment retention and greater lifetime learning advantages.

Beginning in July 2026, [Workforce Pell Grants](#) will allow students to use federal funds to support short-term job-training programs in in-demand fields. Previously, Pell Grants have only been available to students enrolled in longer-term degree or certificate programs. Thousands more students from low-income backgrounds will have [access](#) to workforce training programs outside of degree seeking pathways. While implementation of this change is still underway at the time of this report, states will need to define what qualifies as in-demand employment and determine reliable [data reporting](#).

### GEORGIA



Georgia established the [Top State for Talent](#) initiative, which is a cross-agency collaboration to help Georgia students prepare for meaningful careers. With executive and legislative support, the initiative focuses on reducing silos between education and work. The effort has resulted in a [High Demand Career List](#), the state's first priority list used by businesses, workforce development and education agencies. It functions as a tool to align state resources with current and future workforce needs and helps community members make informed decisions about careers. The list includes careers in the arts as well as careers that benefit from the durable skills arts education supports. The initiative also established the [High Demand Apprenticeship Program](#) that connects state-funding to employers to offset costs as they hire and train employees and implement apprenticeships.

### VIRGINIA



Arlington Public Schools in Virginia established the [Fine Arts Apprenticeship Program](#) that provides students with credit-earning specialized arts experiences for selected high school students. These experiences take place outside of the school day and students select opportunities based on their interests.

### WASHINGTON, D. C.



Arts organizations are also important providers of apprenticeship experiences. In the District of Columbia, the [Arts Institute for Creative Advancement](#), through the D.C. Arts Ed Alliance, provides young people ages 18-24 with workforce development training to work as stagehands in professional theatre and live entertainment settings. Apprentices receive 700 hours of paid instruction, training, mentorship and work experience with partner theaters and organizations. Apprentices are also provided with additional job placement supports post-graduation.

## ENABLE FLEXIBILITY IN STUDENT PATHWAYS TO MEET STATE REQUIREMENTS

Graduation requirements and seat time policies set a foundation for what students experience in high school by outlining required credits and course sequences. These requirements can be created with flexibility to follow student needs and interests and [most states](#) offer some kind of exemption or waivers to schools to facilitate innovation.

At least [25 states](#) require students to develop individualized graduation plans and state polices may require career exploration activities, career goals, academic and personal progress. Further, at least 26 states require students to demonstrate college and career readiness to earn a diploma, which may include completing course sequences aligned with a career cluster, college entrance exams or completing early postsecondary or career-connected experiences.

Additionally, seat time requirements can be a barrier to personalized and career-focused learning opportunities. At least 46 states and the District of Columbia permit students to be awarded flexible credits in different learning settings and modalities that contribute to college and career preparation.

### WASHINGTON, D. C.



The District of Columbia includes language in [graduation requirements](#) that allows local education agencies to establish career-focused courses of study that lead to a high school diploma, and these programs may include additional coursework in the arts.

### WISCONSIN



States like Wisconsin have developed flexibility guides to clearly delineate where areas of flexibility exist under state laws. These guides can provide guidance to schools and districts looking to implement alternative and innovative approaches to education. The Wisconsin guide outlines areas of flexibility including seat time and attendance requirements, equivalencies for credit awards, substituting CTE education and diploma types. The guide includes considerations for assessments, accountability, funding, transportation, professional development and college entry requirements.

## BUILD POLICY INFRASTRUCTURE TO SUPPORT ARTS LEARNING

The previous policy considerations outline strategies broadly to support durable skills development connected to workforce outcomes that can include the arts. However, authentic connections between arts education and durable skills can't be built without intentional focus on the arts.

There are multiple arts-specific policy levers that create conditions for arts learning in schools. AEP's [ArtScan](#) resource offers a comprehensive overview of 16 arts education policy areas across all 50 states, the District of Columbia and the Department of Defense Education Activity. These policy areas reflect arts education instructional requirements, statewide standards adoption, graduation requirements, funding, assessment and accountability, and educator licensure and may be considered in a multi-pronged strategy to support durable skills development through the arts.

### MARYLAND



Maryland recently adopted changes to [licensure requirements](#) to help address educator shortages. These changes reflect options for individuals with demonstrated expertise in the arts seeking licensure to teach art, music, dance or theatre. These [options](#) include fine arts transcript analysis of content-related degrees, coursework and work experience in the arts. Flexible pathways to licensure can reflect the multiple ways artists build expertise and help school recruitment efforts to ensure that highly qualified educators are available to teach the arts in schools.

## FINAL THOUGHTS

Aligning arts education with durable skills education is an authentic solution to meet the everchanging needs of the future of work—a necessary, urgent and actionable priority. Still, there is no single combination of flexibility, requirements or school and community-based programs to most effectively establish these pathways. School, community, postsecondary and industry leaders can work collaboratively to build a coherent set of strategies centered around student interest and input to best meet the needs of young people and employers.



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