

# SUCCESS STORY: The Power of Partnership: Sustaining Arts Integration



## Support Effective Educators and School Leaders

### Why Arts Integration?

Arts integration is best understood as a pedagogical approach rather than a program or initiative. The Kennedy Center [defines arts integration](#) as an approach in which students engage in a creative process that connects an art form and another subject area and meets learning objectives in both. Studies have shown that when students learn through artistic processes, they demonstrate [increased engagement](#), [deeper conceptual understanding](#) and [stronger retention of content](#). Arts integration has also been associated with [positive outcomes](#) for students including, English Learners, by providing multiple entry points for meaning making and expression.

### The Challenge

Over the past two decades, working as a classroom teacher, teaching artist and district fine arts coordinator, I repeatedly observed a disconnect between professional learning and classroom practice. Teachers often participated in inspiring workshops but lacked the follow-up support necessary to transfer new strategies into sustained instruction. [Research suggests](#) that without coaching and continued feedback, there is little likelihood that professional learning will result in meaningful changes to classroom practice.

I also observed schools receiving short term funding for arts integration or STEAM initiatives only to see the instructional model diminish once the funding period ended or staff turnover occurred. These patterns highlighted the need for professional learning structures that build internal capacity within schools rather than relying on temporary external supports. Developing an approach that could support both teacher learning and long-term sustainability became a central design consideration for this work. These experiences underscored the importance of designing professional learning structures that support sustained instructional change over time, rather than short-term implementation tied to a single funding opportunity or training.

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## **Cohort Model Format**

### ***Design and Structure of the Cohort***

When creating a school ecosystem ripe for integrating the arts, it takes a design thinking mindset. It begins with a systematic training model that reaches beyond professional learning workshops alone. I intentionally partner with districts and schools that view this work as a marathon rather than a sprint for their teachers. The cohort is structured to span a full school year, with a gradual release into subsequent years as teachers build confidence and instructional fluency.

[Partner Learning](#) was established prior to my faculty appointment; however, my role at the University of North Georgia has provided an institutional context to further examine, refine and extend this cohort-based model through applied scholarship and graduate-level teacher preparation. Since joining the faculty, this work has informed the development of the Innovative Teaching concentration within the M.Ed. Curriculum and Instruction program, which embeds Georgia Professional Standards Commission STEAM endorsement criteria, provides K–12 educators with access to integrated, interdisciplinary training. This reciprocal relationship between practice and scholarship has strengthened the coherence and transferability of the cohort model.

Partner Learning approaches each cohort as a bounded case study of professional learning in practice. Cohorts typically include 15 to 30 teachers and are organized by grade level and or discipline. We have worked with cohorts of general education teachers, fine arts teachers, ESL teachers, special education teachers and school counselors across K–12 settings. In some cases, cohorts bring together teachers from across a district or region, and professional relationships and collaborations form that continue well beyond the training program.

### ***Professional Learning Cycle***

Cohorts gather quarterly for in-person professional learning and meet monthly through a virtual platform to reflect, receive feedback and determine curricular next steps. Through professional learning across visual arts, media arts, movement, drama and music, teachers explore classroom strategies connected to their instructional contexts.

Training days for teachers include a part of the day dedicated to a live class of students visiting the workshop, enabling cohort participants to observe the teaching artist modeling arts-based instruction in real time through a fishbowl format. This vicarious modeling is intentionally built into the design to strengthen teacher confidence integrating the arts into

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instruction. [Research on self-efficacy](#) suggests that vicariously observing successful practice is a critical factor in strengthening teachers’ belief in their own instructional capabilities.

## Reflection, Transfer and Collaborative Planning

Each professional learning experience includes structured think time dedicated to reflection and transfer. Teachers maintain digital portfolios of their learning or use shared online platforms to capture ideas, instructional artifacts and classroom implementation. Each session culminates with collaborative planning, during which teachers identify their next instructional steps. Next steps typically involve adapting arts-based strategies into standards aligned lessons or units implemented between sessions. Collaborative planning supports teacher self-efficacy as teachers exchange feedback and encouragement while moving from theory into practice. Below is the framework developed and used when designing projects, grounded in Albert Bandura’s research on self-efficacy and its application to professional learning that transfers into classroom practice (see Figure 1).

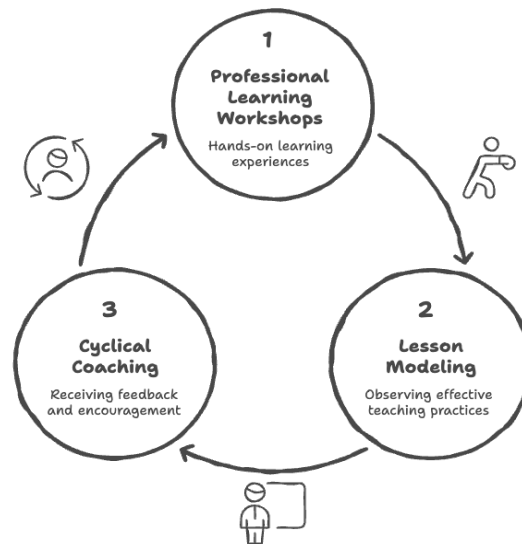


Figure 1. Partner Learning Framework Cycle

## Cohort Learning Timeline

Rather than viewing professional learning as a single training event, Partner Learning structures the cohort as a timeline that reflects how teachers develop practice over time. The Essential phase represents the core sequence and is distributed across the school year to allow classroom implementation between sessions. The Advancing phase is ongoing and flexible rather than tied to a specific year. The timeline below illustrates an example of a sequence of workshops and learning experiences across and beyond a school year (see Figure 2).

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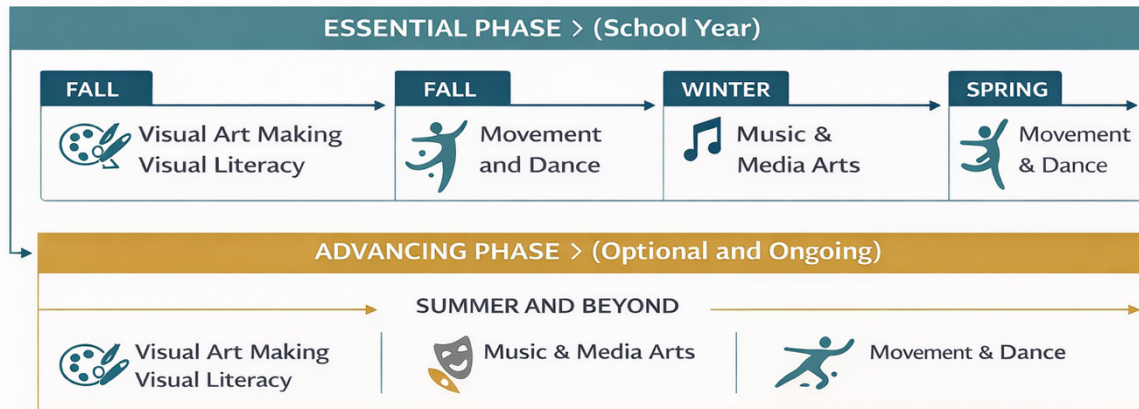


Figure 2. Partner Learning Cohort Timeline

## Teacher Identify as Artists Too

The cohort model for professional learning also addresses teachers’ identities as creative practitioners. A core belief of our professional learning is that teachers are artists too, growing their own creative habits as they engage in their artistic journey. After teachers complete essential training across art forms, they may opt into Advancing Phase experiences. These include exhibition-based inquiry and on-site performance workshops with partners such as the High Museum of Art, Michael C. Carlos Museum, Oakland Cemetery, Alliance Theatre, Atlanta Symphony Orchestra and Center for Puppetry Arts. Below are examples of the immersive experiences that have occurred this past school year with the school district’ cohorts:

- **High Museum:** Studio artmaking connected to the *Faith Ringgold: Seeing Children* exhibition and classroom strategies for literacy
- **Carlos Museum:** Object-based learning from world cultures supporting inquiry, perspective-taking and historical thinking
- **Oakland Cemetery:** Local history, storytelling and site-based literacy lessons
- **Alliance Theatre:** Drama-based strategies for narrative writing and social-emotional learning
- **Atlanta Symphony Orchestra:** Interactive concerts and curriculum tools connecting music and storytelling
- **Center for Puppetry Arts:** Puppetry for K–2 literacy development through performance and storytelling

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## ***The Arts Organizations' Perspective***

Schools and arts organizations often operate in silos with limited opportunities for collaboration. Arts partners are invited to reflect on how these collaborations contribute to a broader arts education ecosystem. Kris Allen, manager of school programs at the Michael C. Carlos Museum at Emory University, shared that the partnership expanded the museum's capacity to serve educators by deepening existing district relationships while also engaging teachers who were visiting the museum for the first time. "Through joint programming, the museum was able to connect its collections more intentionally to classroom instruction and support educators in bringing new strategies back to their practice."

Similarly, Reay Maxwell, who leads education initiatives at the Center for Puppetry Arts, noted that "professional learning experiences centered on puppetry helped teachers rediscover playfulness as an instructional tool. Teachers left workshops motivated to integrate puppetry into literacy instruction, social emotional learning, and classroom community building, often describing a renewed sense of joy and creative confidence."

## **Building and Sustaining the Work Behind the Scenes**

Sustained arts integration requires more than strong workshops. It depends on intentional relationship building, strategic funding and long-term planning for implementation and turnover.

### ***District Partnerships and Cohort Selection***

District partnerships are rooted in long-standing community engagement, including participation on education advisory committees and ongoing collaboration with school and district leaders. These relationships often evolve into long-term partnerships once districts recognize the value of a single organization providing curated, year-long programming aligned to local needs.

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Partner Learning is selective in its cohort work, prioritizing depth over scale. Rather than whole-school mandates, the model favors small, specialized cohorts that allow for meaningful instructional change. This work is most effective when participation is voluntary and when districts commit to a multi-year vision for implementation.

Funding is primarily secured through district professional learning budgets, with some support from individual schools. In many cases, arts integration is explicitly written into Title I plans as an instructional strategy to support student learning. Districts have also used Title III funds to support professional learning connected to English Learners and Title IV, Part A funds to advance well-rounded education and instructional capacity. In some instances, Partner Learning collaborates with schools or districts to co-develop grant proposals aligned to specific instructional goals.

## ***Follow-Up, Feedback and Sustainability***

Instructional support continues beyond formal training. Teachers have access to Partner Learning's virtual office hours for lesson design and implementation support, and schools participate in monthly virtual check-in meetings with leaders and instructional coaches to maintain momentum and accountability. These structures help close the instructional feedback loop between workshops and classroom practice. Schools are also encouraged to host annual or bi-annual instructional walks that celebrate learning through the arts during the regular school day. These walks serve as opportunities for cross-school learning, family engagement and community visibility.

Staff turnover presents an ongoing challenge for any instructional model. To address this, Partner Learning works with administrators to develop sustainability plans that include mentorship structures, peer observation opportunities and protected collaborative planning time among teachers. In districts with multiple arts-focused schools, the essential workshops are offered annually to new teachers across sites, allowing districts to scale support efficiently and economically.

## ***Implications for Schools***

Professional learning is a necessary starting point, but it is not sufficient on its own to sustain arts integration. Instructional change requires ongoing feedback, collaboration and leadership support. Teachers consistently report feeling isolated in their practice and benefit from structured opportunities to work alongside colleagues within and across schools. Building leadership capacity is equally critical. When administrators and instructional coaches champion the work, schools are better equipped to maintain momentum, support new staff and embed arts integration into their instructional culture. Communities of practice that include both teachers and school leaders provide the conditions necessary for sustained implementation and continuous improvement.

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## Acknowledgments



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## About AEP Success Stories

The Arts Education Partnership at Education Commission of the States is a national network of more than 200 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 education and promote continued collaboration and learning for individuals and organizations working toward student achievement and success.

