

# The State of Early Career Mentorship for Arts Educators

A report by the AEP Partnerships With Higher Education Working Group



The Partnerships With Higher Education Working Group began 2025 with the goal of exploring gaps in arts teacher preparation, licensure and early career support. Through our conversations around teacher shortages and varied entry pathways to the teaching profession, we landed on early career support, mentoring or induction programs as our primary area of focus. No matter how new arts teachers enter the profession, there is a need for mentorship.

Arts teachers are often siloed in their classrooms with few, if any, content area peers in their buildings. Thus, early career support is essential. Based on the working group's initial discussion, we explored different methods of mentoring. After speaking with our professional networks, we identified existing mentoring programs for early career arts educators.

Based on our discussions and research into programs across the country, we selected three programs we wanted to dive deeper into. Seven areas were identified to learn more information about the programs:

1. Overall program structure
2. Mentoring
3. Identification, recruitment and matching of mentees to mentors
4. Professional learning opportunities
5. Professional community
6. Incentives
7. Sponsors or funding sources

With these areas of focus, the group developed questions for surveys and interviews to help the selected organizations share about their program. To develop this report, we summarized our findings with a specific focus on practices and policies that might be replicable across multiple early career support efforts. This document reflects what we learned and potential next steps for the field.

## Why teacher mentorship programs?

Our group’s decision to focus on early career teacher mentorship for arts educators aligns closely with national concerns about [teacher shortages](#) as well as with the Arts Education Partnership’s (AEP) ongoing priorities. Teacher shortages and high rates of teacher mobility are an enduring and worsening challenge in the United States, with multiple studies demonstrating that [teacher turnover](#) and [teacher shortages](#) are harmful to both student learning and school climate. A stable teaching workforce is essential for strong, thriving schools, and replacing teachers can be a major expense, costing upwards of [\\$25,000 to recruit and onboard new teachers](#) in some districts. Targeted support for early career teachers can be an essential tool for increasing [teacher retention](#) in the profession.

AEP has long been attentive to concerns around the arts teaching workforce. The organization previously published several reports on the arts teaching workforce and also has created a hub of existing resources on the teacher workforce. As a part of this ongoing work, AEP notes four categories of teacher workforce research: recruitment, retention, preparation and development. Our working group’s conversations around these workforce areas were wide-ranging but eventually settled into a focus on efforts to retain teachers with early career support through mentorship programs.

## Which teacher mentorship programs?



### **Baltimore Arts Every Day - Early Career Arts Teachers Fellowship**

**Initiated:** 2023

**Arts Areas Served:** All arts disciplines

**Scope:** District-wide

**Teachers Served:** Year 1-3 teachers; Certified or conditionally certified teachers in Baltimore City Schools; 25-30 teachers served yearly

**Funding:** Grew out of a National Endowment for the Arts grant; Baltimore City Schools’ Office of Fine Arts and Arts for Learning Maryland – additional funding from local foundations

**Implementation Partners:** School district staff; non-profit staff

The Baltimore Arts Every Day Arts Teachers Fellowship works with arts educators in Baltimore City Schools. The city-wide program provides support to teachers in their first three years in the classroom. Working across all arts areas, the program offers professional learning sessions for participants and pair teachers with veteran or retired mentor teachers in their discipline. Teachers receive at least 25 hours of support over the year, including two classroom observations, quarterly mentor meetings and monthly check-in calls. The program provides a stipend for participating educators through funding from the Maryland State Department of Education. Mentors receive a stipend through Baltimore City Public Schools. While the program is specific to Baltimore, they are informed by what Arts Education in Maryland Schools, a state-supported fine arts education panel, is learning about needs at the state level.



### California State University Arts Education ColLab Mentoring Community of Practice

**Initiated:** 2021

**Arts Areas Served:** Visual Arts

**Scope:** Alumni

**Teachers Served:** Newly credentialed art teachers who are alumni of CSU Northridge and Long Beach; 8-12 teachers served yearly

**Funding:** Grassroots effort including 2024 research grant from National Art Education Association (NAEA)

**Implementation Partners:** University faculty; program completers returning as mentors

In partnership, CSU Northridge and Long Beach established the CSU CoLab Mentoring Community of Practice. Serving visual arts educators exclusively, this program was developed as an organic, single content area program designed to serve program graduates from the two universities. Because of its smaller size and scope, ColLab is responsive to shaping its professional learning sessions around the needs of each cohort. Participants are alumni who are traditionally certified teachers as well as some who are in the process of obtaining certification while they work as interns. Mentors and beginning teachers meet monthly with facilitators for professional learning conversations, and mentors schedule biweekly or monthly check-ins with their mentees. This grassroots program, provided by university faculty as a form of service, does not receive any direct funding. Due to this barrier the program is not able to provide financial incentives for mentors or participants. The primary incentive is connecting early career educators with community and providing peer and mentor support.



### Iowa Model of Excellence Mentoring Program

**Initiated:** 2005

**Arts Areas Served:** All disciplines

**Scope:** State-wide

**Teachers Served:** Year 1 and 2 teachers in Iowa; 110-120 teachers served yearly

**Funding:** State legislature with donated matching funds

**Implementation Partners:** Professional arts organizations; statewide advocacy organization

The Iowa Model of Excellence Mentoring Program was both well established with 20 years of experience and had developed a strong base of funding. As a statewide program, a sizable portion of the operation is [funded through the state budget](#) via the Iowa Arts Alliance. The program structure serves licensed fine arts educators in their first and second years teaching across all arts content areas, with teachers receiving mentoring and professional development. In this program, both mentors and mentees receive financial incentives for participation, and participants are identified through their respective professional organizations. Participants are also incentivized with a scholarship to pay membership dues for their professional organizations. Mentoring is responsive to teacher request, and teachers may receive unlimited mentoring sessions. Professional learning sessions are provided during a day-long fall symposium that is aimed at being responsive to the needs of beginning teachers.

## What have we learned?

While each program's approach is unique, there were similar themes around what helped the effectiveness of the mentorship support:

- Continuous mentorship opportunities
- Integration into the professional arts organizations most aligned with discipline
- Community of early-career peers in arts disciplines
- Discipline-specific mentoring

## Effective Practices

**Building Community:** One common thread for effectiveness has been the building of community to reduce silos and build resource hubs for inductees.

**Shared Arts Discipline:** Another effective aspect of mentorship programs has been the sharing of an arts discipline as the focus of the mentorship. While it seems that sharing the same arts discipline is most beneficial, having the common connection of the broader area of arts education also appears vital to relational support.

**Dual Support:** We also noted that having the dual support of mentorship within a district or school for logistics and resources truly complements the process. The purpose of these effective programs was not to replace other forms of induction or mentorship, rather to provide the additional focus needed to support arts-based instruction.

## What can be replicable?

We noted several practices that might be considered for replication by those hoping to support early career arts educators through mentoring.

**Be responsive to teacher needs:** For teachers in their early career, responsiveness to their needs is essential. Across the programs, teams noted that the teacher's needs must be centered and emphasized that mentoring should not be evaluative in any way.

**Connect teachers with professional organizations:** One way of helping reduce the silos frequently experienced by arts educators is to connect them with their statewide professional organizations early in their careers. These connections are vital to ensuring that teachers build a strong teacher identity and feel part of a broader community of educators in their discipline.

**Start small and build over time:** Whether starting from a single discipline, a single university, or school district or municipality, programs should be open to starting at a smaller scale and expanding as funding, support and best practices grow.

**Consider which organization is the right initiating partner:** The diverse programs highlighted demonstrate that there is no one-size-fits-all organization that should start a program. The programs profiled here include those run by a state advocacy organization, a local non-profit in partnership with a school district and a university.

**Ensure buy-in from key governance bodies and leaders:** Whether at the state or local level, it is essential to ensure that leaders are aware and supportive of these efforts. Those desiring to grow a mentorship program might seek support from state legislators, school board members, state agency staff and district staff to ensure smooth operation, alignment with local and state policies and funding support.

**Be intentional with matching teachers and mentors:** Look for potential points of connection between teachers and mentors such as school location (i.e. rural, urban or suburban), grade levels taught or art discipline program. Training for both mentors and mentees are helpful to assure a supportive, non-evaluative relationship. When possible, make it clear that if the match is not working, there may be an option for changing mentors.

## Sustaining Support

The passion of individuals who care about mentoring arts educators is central. Across the three programs, these individuals included near peers as well as experienced in-service arts educators and retirees. Arts administrators, arts professional organization personnel and faculty, while not formal mentors in these programs, also play a role in creating a sense of community and coordinating efforts among stakeholders. Access to knowledge about arts education resources also supports sustainability. Understanding the opportunities for formal versus informal support in mentoring was also important. The need for establishing a professional community seems central to both the sustainability of the teachers being mentored and the organization leading the mentorship and induction.

Professional community support is a critical component. It can be described as three basic types:

1. Early career teachers paired with established, veteran teachers
2. Early career teachers supported by peers that are recent inductees themselves
3. Mentorship through discipline-specific and/or broader professional organizations

A common thread across the programs is the value in having arts-specific induction or mentor support for all arts educators even if a broader induction program is available in the state or district that does not offer it.

It is also important to consider how the programs intersect with or align directly to state induction requirements. In some contexts, arts-specific mentoring may serve as an additive, supplementary support that strengthens existing induction. In others, overlapping responsibilities may risk supplanting or duplicating state-mandated supports, potentially overwhelming early career teachers. Sustainability requires being attentive to whether alignment with state programs enhances teacher experience or inadvertently burdens them. In some cases, delaying official induction in favor of arts-specific, more responsive mentoring could provide a stronger foundation for teachers before they enter more formalized induction systems.

Finally, sustainability was fostered when mentors helped inductees navigate systems such as funding, classroom environment, management and scheduling. Giving new teachers support as they learn both the systems and the professional culture may be one of the most important aspects of mentorship and professional community.

## Policy Levers

The strongest policy lever shared was getting language into state regulations or codes to support the mentoring programs. In addition, establishing collaborative partnerships with broader, non-arts professional induction programs was seen as beneficial to both arts and non-arts parties.

Establishing budget funding by the state could be an aspirational goal. Using [ArtScan](#) or connecting with your [State Education Agency Directors of Arts Education](#) (SEADAE) person can provide information on what programs already exist, where gaps remain and what additional supports are needed in communities. In Iowa, for example, both regulation and funding from the state are integral to the mentorship program. Their goal is to increase state funding to the level that the program can run without the need for staff time obtaining continuous matching funds, but to move all focus to support the mentoring aspect of programming. Arts Education in Maryland Schools has affected policy by advocacy that has become strong enough for the state to ask the panel for suggestions on ways to improve mentoring. CSU ColLab is adjusting to new California law that requires arts education in schools. Each program is using legislation as a lever to demonstrate both the need for their mentoring program and their impact on teacher sustainability for arts educators participating in their programs.

## Questions for the field

As we consider what we have learned, we also consider what additional gaps may exist in support for early career arts educators. We also want to understand the nature of the gaps. Following are some questions for the field that grow from this work:

- How similar are the needs of early career arts educators across states and municipalities? Which support needs are localized, and which are widespread?
- How can arts-specific mentoring programs best complement existing state or district induction programs without duplicating efforts or overwhelming new teachers?
- What funding models such as state budget line-items, university partnerships, non-profit or foundation support provide the most sustainable path for arts-specific mentoring programs?
- How does your arts-specific mentorship program address issues of equity in access to induction, particularly for teachers in rural areas or those teaching outside their area of preparation?

*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's efforts to communicate, collaborate, convene and connect policymakers, stakeholders and leaders across the arts education field are supported by the following foundation partners: The Hewlett Foundation and The Wallace Foundation.*

