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Engaging the Arts in the Broader Education Policy Landscape

JILL MULLEN AND KATE WOLFF

Each day, thousands of policymakers across the country — from district superintendents and statewide elected officials to local school board members and the U.S. secretary of education — grapple with pressing challenges facing the American education system. In 2018 alone, more than 1,400 new state statutes were enacted related to education policy.¹

These bills — ranging from school finance and workforce development to teacher quality and early learning — reflect some of the larger trends in education policy that stakeholders and policymakers have been engaged with for years. However, public opinion on how well schools serve students continues to show dissatisfaction with the system.²

As policymakers and stakeholders continue to look for ways to improve K-12 education, address competing economic demands and meet the needs of all students, promising arts in education practices may hold new ideas to meet these goals. Emerging opportunities include using arts learning to contribute to the development of [deeper learning and 21st century workforce skills](#), implementing strategies to [prepare educators for arts integration](#) and using [creative youth development](#) programs to address the needs of underserved youth.

Looking forward, the Arts Education Partnership at Education Commission of the States has identified additional education policy areas where arts in education leaders and stakeholders can expand opportunities to engage the arts in policy solutions.

As policymakers and stakeholders continue to look for ways to improve K-12 education, address competing economic demands and meet the needs of all students, promising arts in education practices may hold new ideas to reach goals for equity, accountability and engagement.

By examining current education policy issues, arts education stakeholders may find new ways to engage with the education system and expand access to arts opportunities.

Equity

Supports for equity in education can span sectors and approaches — from mission-driven organizations devoted to achieving equity to scholarly articles about the current state of equity within the system. Through the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), states have an opportunity “to equitably design education systems to ensure that the students who have historically been underserved ... receive an education that prepares them for the demands of the 21st century.”³

States are targeting resources and distributing more funding to schools serving disadvantaged students to help close the achievement gap. For many states, a focus on equity means supporting access to high-quality teachers, challenging coursework and support services.⁴ By removing barriers to resources and opportunities, and investing in an equitable education for all, states can help prepare more students for graduation, postsecondary education and successful careers.

Nationwide, the [2016 Nation's Arts Report Card](#) shows that 13 percent of students attend schools that offer music classes less than once a week or not at all, and 21 percent attend schools that offer visual arts classes less than once a week or not at all.⁵ Research shows that “teenagers and young adults of low socioeconomic status who have a history of in-depth arts involvement show better academic outcomes.”⁶ Unfortunately, under-resourced schools in economically disadvantaged communities, where students stand to gain the most from arts education opportunities, often lack resources and capacity to provide arts programming. To help address this gap, some organizations — including the [National Endowment for the Arts](#) — provide grants for arts education programs within schools. A large portion of NEA’s funding supports arts-rich experiences in underserved communities and educators in the arts.

One way states are working to address equity through the arts is through the programs of Title I, Part A of ESSA — which are designed to ensure that all students have access to a high-quality education, to support students who are academically at risk and to help close the achievement gap. With the new flexibility under ESSA, states have a number of opportunities for engaging the arts in these educational priorities.⁷

For example, the [Title I Arts Initiative](#), created by the California Alliance for Arts Education, helps schools use Title I funds to include additional arts education programming in a school’s overall strategy to increase student achievement. Using the policy pathway model outlined in the initiative, **Arizona** used Title I funds to create the Strengthening Schools Through Arts Partnerships grant program — a collaboration between the Arizona Commission on the Arts and the Arizona Department of Education (ADE).

Beginning in 2014, the program awarded pilot grants to low-performing, Title I schools to partner with nonprofit arts organizations to strengthen teaching, arts education and incorporate arts into classroom instruction. Four schools, including Avondale Middle School in Phoenix, received pilot grants through the Strengthening Schools Through Arts Partnerships program. The pilot at Avondale included an arts-integration program for math and English language arts, as well as an after-school theatre club. [ADE’s assessment of the program](#) found that students in 5 out of 6 classes using arts-integrated programs performed better academically than non-participating students, and that the attendance rate increased during the days when the arts-integrated classes took place.

Overall, findings from the pilot grants “confirmed that across school type, grade level and arts discipline, arts programs connected to a school’s school improvement plan or capacity building efforts had a significant impact on academic achievement, student engagement and student self-efficacy.”⁸ Based on these results, **Arizona** expanded the grant program to all Title I schools for the 2018-19 school year.

In 2016, also with guidance from the California Title I Arts Initiative model, **New Jersey** created the [Title I Arts Integration Pilot Program](#) to use federal funds to award 10 \$100,000 grants to local education agencies with Title I schools. **New Jersey** designed the program to explore how research-based, arts-integration techniques could help Title I students meet state standards and support school improvement efforts.

One grant recipient, Durban Avenue Elementary School in Hopatcong, N.J., created S+M(ART) — a program held after school, on Saturdays and over the summer — to support student achievement in language arts, writing and geometry in fourth and fifth grade. Working in collaborative groups, students engaged in performing, visual and media arts activities to explore math concepts and film their own projects — which premiered at a red-carpet event for families held at the school. [After participating in the program](#), on average, students’ baseline geometry skills increased by 21 percent, and language arts pre- and post-test scores increased by 114 percent. Teachers at Durban Avenue highlight not only “noticeable, meaningful” gains in academics for students participating in the arts-integration program, but also improvements in classroom behavior and social-emotional learning.

[Following the conclusion](#) of the pilot program, the state department of education hopes to identify a variety of evidence-based, arts-integration strategies supported by school-level student data that can contribute to increased student achievement and school improvement.

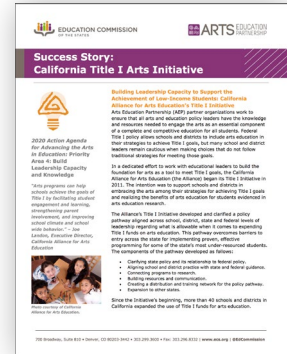
Policy Considerations

For state policymakers and other stakeholders exploring equity considerations within their education systems, the following may provide a helpful frame of how to engage the arts:

- States may consider **issuing guidance** to districts explicitly supporting the use of specific funding, such as Title I or Title IV, for arts education or arts-integration strategies.
- As most [states collect data](#) on every school district, school and student through statewide longitudinal data systems, they may be able to use this information to **assess the condition of arts education** statewide. States could identify gaps and **encourage community partnerships** with teaching artists or other local organizations to increase opportunities at all schools.
- Many school leaders use a **budget line item for the arts** to clearly articulate their programmatic goals, and stakeholders may consider encouraging a similar budgetary strategy at the state or district level.

Accountability

School accountability systems can serve many purposes and provide helpful information to a variety of stakeholders. Accountability systems may include public report cards or other outward-facing data aggregation to give students, parents and community members insight into school performance. Accountability systems also give state and district leaders regular updates on progress toward state and local goals.



For more on the California Title I Arts Initiative, see AEP’s [Success Story](#).

These systems can also support advancements toward educational equity by revealing achievement gaps and where schools and districts may need additional help in supporting students. As a result of ESSA, which gives states more authority over their accountability systems than under previous law, many states are transitioning from a system focused solely on assessments and graduation rates to one that incorporates a variety of measures of school quality.⁹

ESSA requires state accountability plans to include five indicators: 1) proficiency on assessments, which may include growth in proficiency in high school; 2) growth in proficiency in grades below high school or another academic indicator; 3) high school graduation rates; 4) progress of English learners toward proficiency; and 5) a fifth other indicator. The law requires this indicator to be a valid, reliable and comparable measure of school quality or student success within each state's accountability system.¹⁰ This final indicator creates new opportunities for the arts in education.¹¹

Nineteen states (35 percent) included arts within key areas of their state accountability systems outlined in their ESSA plans.¹² Seven states (**Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan and Minnesota**) and the **District of Columbia** incorporated a well-rounded education, which includes the arts and music. **New Hampshire** and **Wyoming** included the arts as options in the postsecondary and career readiness components. And **Connecticut** and **Illinois** included access and participation rates in music and arts education.¹³

In developing its ESSA plan, **Illinois** embraced the new federal guidance to support a well-rounded education and developed a plan reflective of its goal to be a “state of whole, healthy children nested in whole, healthy systems supporting communities wherein all people are socially and economically secure.” Among the components of this goal, [Illinois' accountability system](#) establishes a point system for schools, with awards based on weighted indicators — such as standardized test scores, English learner proficiency and chronic absenteeism.

Illinois adopted the arts as one of five school quality measures for both elementary and high school. A coalition of stakeholders — led by the [Arts Alliance Illinois](#) — worked with the Illinois State Board of Education to ensure the state's ESSA plan included the arts indicator and now continues to engage with policymakers as the state develops the details of the measurement. In the meantime, the state continues to collect data on student participation in arts programs until an appropriate measure is determined. **Illinois** includes chronic absenteeism, the percentage of ninth-graders on track to graduate, college and career readiness, and a climate survey indicator as the other [school quality measures in its ESSA plan](#).

Many state ESSA plans focused on college and career readiness as a school quality indicator. Thirty-five states include a measure of career readiness in their accountability system for high school, and seven additional states have signaled future inclusion, [according to Advance CTE](#). As [research shows](#) strong connections between arts education and the skills necessary for success in the 21st century, policymakers may want to further explore the ways in which the arts can contribute to career and college readiness.

Wyoming includes two indicators in its ESSA plan for determining school quality and student success at the high school level: an equity indicator and a postsecondary readiness indicator. The [postsecondary readiness indicator](#) measurement includes the percentage of 12th-grade students at a school completing either a college preparatory curriculum or a career and technical education pathway. In **Wyoming**, a college prep curriculum consists of four years of math, science, English and social studies — in addition to two years of foreign language, career and technical education, or fine arts. By recognizing the arts as a critical pathway to career and college readiness, students in **Wyoming** will have access to coursework that may help them develop their creativity, strengthen problem-solving abilities, build collaboration and communication skills and increase their capacity for leadership.¹⁴

Policy Considerations

For state policymakers interested in expanding accountability systems to include additional measures of school quality and student success, the following may provide a helpful frame of how to engage the arts:

- States may consider **including the arts in other measures beyond participation rates**. If including chronic absenteeism as an indicator, states could use the arts as a tactic to help underperforming schools in this measure. If including school climate as an indicator, increasing arts engagement could help with this measure.
- States may consider the **arts as a school improvement strategy**. Some communities have found success with one model, known as Turnaround Arts. Released in 2015, a three-year program evaluation of the Turnaround Arts pilot schools found significant improvement in academic achievement, reduction in disciplinary referrals and increases in attendance, among other findings. In addition, the study found that Turnaround Arts schools outperformed comparable schools in the same city or state that received federal funds for school improvement.¹⁵

Engagement

Engaging students and families in school activities plays an essential role in student success. [Research shows](#) that family involvement helps prepare students for college and to achieve higher test scores, and also increases attendance rates. Traditionally, states and school systems have viewed family engagement as limited to a parent or guardian engaging in activities that support their child's academic work, such as parent-teacher conferences or scheduled school meetings. More recently, studies have focused on other ways schools can build partnerships and facilitate trust with families to involve them more in their child's education. Teachers can foster personal relationships with families through [home visits and informal conversations](#); sharing information about a [student's skill levels](#); and discussing a [student's interests and challenges](#) with parents.

ESSA also includes language on promoting training and collaboration between parents and educators. A new program under [ESSA](#), Title IV-E: Family Engagement in Education Programs, provides grants to states of at least \$500,000 to support the creation of statewide family engagement centers.

Student engagement also plays a crucial role in academic success. If students are not actively engaged and mentally present during lessons, a state's investment in a student's education may not be as beneficial.¹⁶ Stakeholders encourage schools to create positive climates where students feel valued, empowered, academically challenged and safe.¹⁷ Educators can also play a role in fostering student engagement by building a supportive classroom culture and nurturing relationships with their students. Increased student engagement leads to higher graduation rates, better attendance, fewer disciplinary problems and postsecondary success.¹⁸

[Multiple research studies](#) spanning pre-kindergarten through high school suggest that arts education supports development in the engagement, attention, motivation and persistence necessary for students to succeed independently in college and the workforce. Arts-centered initiatives can improve school climate and culture and connect schools to families and communities. For example, students at schools with extensive arts education opportunities think more positively about and engage in classroom activities, have better student and teacher attendance, and maintain teacher satisfaction with and engagement in their work. In addition, arts education participation encourages parental and community engagement through attendance at school performances, community events and programs, and volunteer opportunities.

In response to cuts to arts education funding in the early 2000s, theatre and dance teachers at the University of Texas at Austin partnered with local schools to create professional development opportunities for teachers to learn how to integrate drama techniques into classroom instruction. Expanding across **Texas** and beyond, the [Drama for Schools](#) (DFS) program focuses on local, research-based needs and techniques to support learning within arts-rich schools and fosters collaboration between educators, families, community leaders and local artists to support arts learning.

Through the [DFS training program](#), teachers master tools that they can adapt across content areas and contexts and learn how to support a variety of learning styles that keep students actively engaged. Teachers who incorporated drama into the curriculum — providing students with opportunities to voice ideas and learn creatively — saw increased student engagement. [Teachers noted](#) that students showed increased self-efficacy and interest in lessons, and that the new techniques created a more positive learning environment.

In **California**, budget cuts prompted community members in the Chula Vista Elementary School District to find new ways to bring arts education back into the school. School leaders at CVESD, which had not provided in-school music instruction for 15 years, partnered with the San Diego Youth Symphony and Conservatory on the [Community Opus Project — an after-school music pilot program in two Title I schools](#). The pilot project tracked student outcomes using district data, engaged families and shared research on the value of the arts in education.

The pilot program has since expanded across the district, and school leaders have committed to reinstate arts education in schools for all of the district’s nearly 30,000 students.¹⁹ Following the program’s first year, one of the key findings for school leaders shows that parents were more engaged in their child’s music education during this time. Families were “overflowing school concert events” and volunteering during the school day. Student attendance increased by 0.5 percent overall. By providing an opportunity to invite families into the school building and share in students’ successes in the arts, school leaders were able to build engagement beyond the music room.²⁰

Policy Considerations

For state policymakers and school leaders looking for ways to increase student and family engagement in schools, the following may provide a helpful frame of how to engage the arts:

- States may consider **formalizing parent engagement** through the creation of an advisory board or other formal entity that provides parents the opportunity to submit feedback on decision-making and areas for improvement that might include the arts.
- Schools can encourage the use of student performance and art displays to bring family and community members into the school building to **foster one-on-one relationship-building** with teachers and school leaders.
- Local districts can include community arts organizations at the table when **engaging youth-serving organizations** in school support and decision-making.

For More Information and Ideas



For more information and ideas about the intersections between the arts and education, please visit the Arts Education Partnership website: www.aep-arts.org.

ENDNOTES

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AUTHORS

Jill Mullen is a policy researcher at Education Commission of the States. Jill holds a bachelor's degree in Political Science from New York University and a law degree from the University of Denver. In her free time, Jill enjoys paddleboarding, tacos and audiobooks. Contact Jill at jmullen@ecs.org or **303.299.3653**.

Kate Wolff is assistant director of the Arts Education Partnership and a member of the state relations team at Education Commission of the States. In these roles, Kate works closely with AEP partner organizations across the country to engage and inform their efforts to expand access to the arts in education, and she serves as a resource on broader education policy issues for Education Commission of the States Commissioners and states in the mid-Atlantic and Eastern parts of the United States. Contact Kate at kwolff@ecs.org or **202.844.6281**.

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