

The Arts in Schools of Choice

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Since the Every Student Succeeds Act became law, states have taken advantage of opportunities to [engage the arts more broadly in education policy](#) — from including the [arts in STEM](#) education to using the arts as a strategy to [meet the needs of underserved youth](#). At the same time, many states' policy agendas address school choice, with ongoing discussion by champions and critics alike. However, many states have yet to consider the policy landscape for the intersection of arts education and school choice.

Schools of choice include charter, magnet, open enrollment, private and home-schools; and policies such as education savings accounts, scholarship tax credits and vouchers allow parents to use public dollars to pay for private school options.

Regardless of whether a student attends a traditional public school or school of choice, access to a high-quality education remains a priority for policymakers, school and district leaders, and parents. Arts education has a demonstrated impact on student achievement and social outcomes, and these outcomes are [particularly significant](#) for students from historically underserved communities. While researchers have not widely explored the connection between arts education and school choice policies, increased understanding of this intersection and potential opportunities to engage the arts may allow policymakers to better support at-risk students, who have been shown to experience [increased benefits](#) from arts participation.

While the intersection between arts education and school choice have not been fully explored in the research community, they are evident in the implementation of state policies related to theme-based charter and magnet schools.

Arts requirements also are often embedded in statewide policies related to assessment, standards, teacher certification and/or graduation requirements.

States can ensure that students have access to arts education — regardless of school type — through practices that include dissemination of statewide arts education data and strategic planning.

Research

[Little research exists](#) on the intersection of school choice and arts education, and the studies that do exist offer mixed findings on the impact of school choice on student access to arts education. [One study](#) suggests that of all the public and private school types, charter schools had the lowest availability of arts (dance, music, theater and visual arts) education. However, [another study](#) shows that charter schools in Chicago offered significantly more music instruction than traditional public schools — though both types of schools offered less music instruction than the national average.

Study findings also suggest that these schools may consider music education as a supplemental activity rather than a core subject area.

Arts-Themed Schools

In many cases, states grant schools of choice more autonomy than traditional public schools to design and implement curricula, which may allow flexibility to incorporate arts education. A school may include an arts education focus, or theme, in the charter school's contract or charter. Magnet schools specifically offer instruction around a theme, which may include the arts.

Charter Schools

Charter schools are semi-autonomous public schools that receive public funding and operate under a written charter with an authorizer (sometimes called a sponsor). A school's charter exempts it from most state laws and regulations governing other public schools, in exchange for increased accountability, and details how the school will be organized and

Additionally, most research focuses specifically on charter schools, and schools of choice include a variety of public and private school choice options — ranging from increased public school options to policies that allow parents to use public dollars to pay for private school.

The intersection of arts education and school choice is most evident in the implementation of state policies related to public options, such as charter schools, magnet schools and open enrollment districts — including those related to theme-based charter and magnet schools. They also may intersect in state policies related to arts education requirements and in school admission policies.

managed. Some state laws specify the types of schools that authorizers must prioritize when considering charter applications — for example, schools that expand educational opportunities for at-risk students.

Laws in **Maine, Massachusetts** and **North Carolina** [allow charter school authorizers](#) to give preference to applications for schools with specific academic approaches or themes, innovations and comprehensive learning experiences.

Additionally, [21 states have laws](#) directing authorizers to give preference to charter school applications that demonstrate a commitment to serving at-risk students. [Research shows](#) a strong relationship between high levels of arts participation and academic achievement for at-risk youth, including improved school grades, test scores, honors society membership, high school graduation, college enrollment

and achievement, volunteering, and civic engagement. Using arts education as a strategy to support at-risk students can provide a connection to charter school laws related to authorization.

STATE EXAMPLES

The **Maine** Charter School Commission was established by law to oversee public charter schools in the state. State policy allows the commission to authorize 10 schools during the first 10 years. Nine of the 10 schools have been established, and of the nine, two focus on the arts: [Fiddlehead School of Arts and Sciences](#) and [Maine Arts Academy](#).

The **Massachusetts** Board of Elementary and Secondary Education authorizes public charter schools, which [currently serve 44,000 students in 70 schools](#). Of the 70 schools, two focus on the arts: [Berkshire Arts and Technology Charter Public School](#) and [Pioneer Valley Performing Arts Charter Public School](#).

Charter schools in **North Carolina** are authorized by the state board of education and are operated by independent, nonprofit boards of directors. Currently, 185 active public charter schools exist in North Carolina, and six focus on the arts: [ArtSpace Charter School](#), [Longleaf School of the Arts](#), [Sallie B Howard School for the Arts and Education](#), [Sandhills Theatre Arts Renaissance School](#), [The Arts Based School](#) and [Z.E.C.A. School of Arts and Technology](#).

Magnet Schools

[Magnet schools](#) are public schools or programs with a specialized focus or theme that offer advanced coursework and/or training for students. School districts or a group of school districts or states typically operate magnet schools, and states have adopted magnet school policies that include opportunities for the arts — such as specialized curricula, serving gifted and talented students and experiential learning.

STATE EXAMPLES

Connecticut [defines magnet schools](#) as programs that support racial, ethnic and economic diversity and offer a unique and high-quality curriculum. The state department of education identifies the arts as a specialized subject area and has established five magnet schools for the arts [in the greater Hartford area](#) and 15 [outside the greater Hartford area](#).

Minnesota [statute](#) encourages school districts to establish magnet schools to increase opportunities to participate in experiential learning in a nontraditional setting and requires a district's board of education to adopt a plan for providing this service. The Minnesota Department of Education [identifies](#) creativity and innovation as knowledge and skills of experiential learning and includes field trips as a model of teaching.

In **Ohio**, the board of education of each school district must file a plan to serve gifted and talented students. State regulation includes [magnet schools](#) in the list of available services and [visual and performing arts ability](#) in the categories of gifted students.

Admission Policies and State Arts Education Requirements

For schools of choice that specialize in the arts, states have adopted policies that guide schools in creating admission requirements to accept students based on artistic merit. Many states have adopted arts education policies — such as standards, assessments, graduation requirements and educator licensure requirements — and some states require charter schools to meet the same requirements as traditional public schools.

Admission Policies

Policies related to student admission can enhance arts education programs in schools of choice. For example, open enrollment policies allow students to transfer to a public school of their choice, rather than attending a school based on where they live.

New Hampshire's [open enrollment schools](#) may limit enrollment to specific grades or areas of academic focus, including the arts, and schools can select students based on aptitude or academic achievement. [Forty-seven states and the District of Columbia](#) have open enrollment policies. Depending on the state, policies may be mandatory or voluntary and may allow students to transfer within their assigned district (intradistrict) or outside their assigned district (interdistrict).

DISTRICT EXAMPLE

Baltimore City Public Schools in **Maryland** is an example of an open enrollment district that worked to increase districtwide access to arts education in public and charter schools. Funded by the National Endowment for the Arts, Arts Every Day launched the [Baltimore Arts Education Initiative](#) to develop a fine

arts [strategic plan](#) to ensure equity in and access to arts education throughout the district (in accordance with [Maryland fine arts education regulations](#)). The plan includes five-year implementation goals for access, sequential instruction, arts integration, in- and out-of-school partnerships, professional development, sustainability and accountability. In 2018, Baltimore City Public Schools adopted the strategic plan as a part of the [Blueprint for Success](#), which outlines the district's plan to transform public schools. By 2022, the initiative seeks to increase access throughout the district so that all students have an equitable opportunity to education in the arts.

ArtScan at a Glance



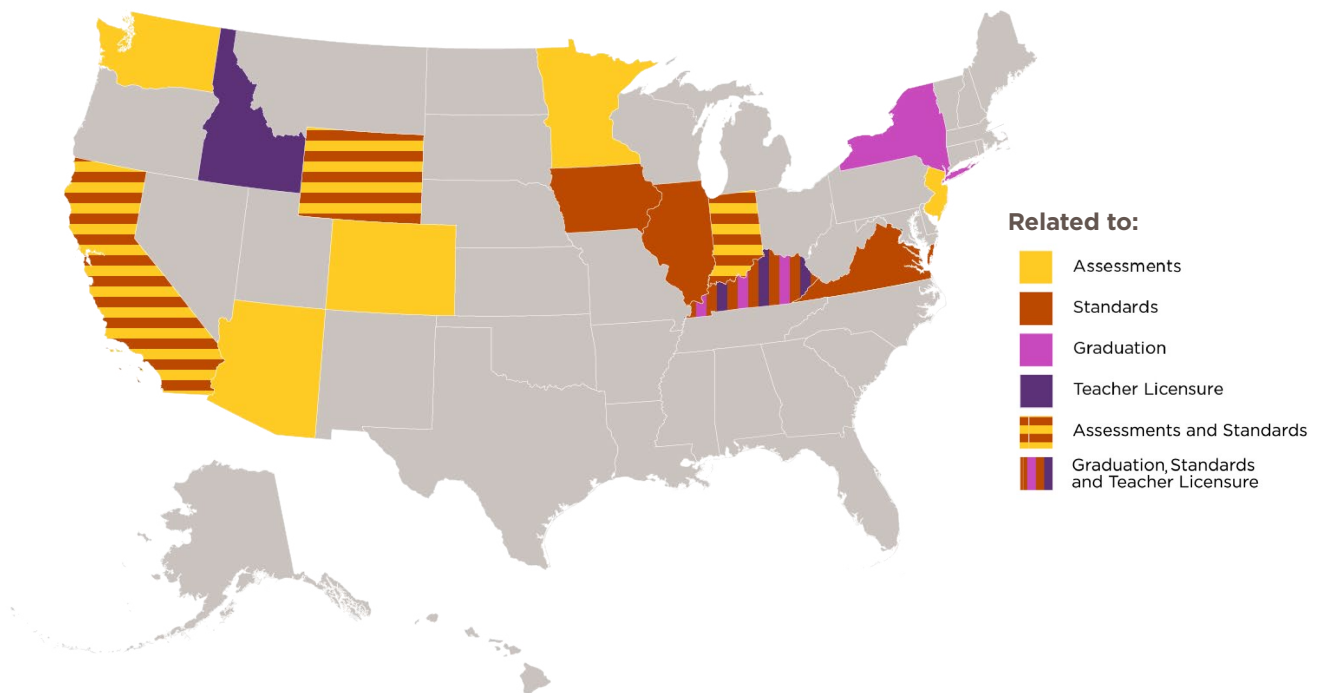
See how your state addresses the arts in education policy in [this summary](#) from the Arts Education Partnership.

State Arts Education Requirements

[All states and the District of Columbia](#) have adopted early childhood, elementary and secondary standards for arts education. In addition, 43 states require instruction in arts education at the elementary and middle school levels, and 44 states have a requirement at the high school level. Beyond instructional requirements and standards, states have adopted arts education requirements related to high school graduation, assessment and teacher licensure.

Generally, states exempt charter schools from policies that govern traditional public schools, but the exemptions vary. [Policies in 30 states](#) say that charter schools are not exempt from statewide rules related to assessment, standards, teacher certification and graduation requirements. Of the 30 states, [14 have arts education requirements](#). In these states, charter schools are not exempt from certain arts education requirements.

States With Arts Education Requirements for Charter Schools



Source: [Education Commission of the States](#) and [Arts Education Partnership](#).

Home-School Subject Area Requirements Under State Policy

In some states, home-schooled students participate in online schools, virtual charter schools or other distance education options. States' home schooling policies vary widely and no federal home-school policies exist. Twenty-nine states and the District of Columbia [direct home-school instructors](#) to provide instruction in certain subjects, typically mathematics, language arts, science and social studies. At least five of the 29 states and the District of Columbia — [Illinois](#), [Maine](#), [Minnesota](#), [Ohio](#) and [Vermont](#) — include fine arts in required subject areas. Additionally, four states — [Oregon](#), [South Carolina](#), [Texas](#) and [Utah](#) — have adopted policies allowing home-schooled students to participate in extracurricular activities — including arts programs — at public or charter schools in their resident districts.

Despite policies surrounding arts education requirements, levels of participation for both traditional public schools and schools of choice remain unclear. As a response, states have established virtual data dashboards to report [arts education data](#) at school, district and state levels.

California has created an [online arts education data dashboard](#) and requires charter schools to meet the arts education

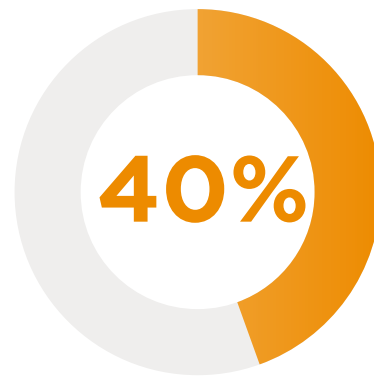
requirements in state standards and assessments. The tool — established by Create CA, the California Department of Education and the Arts Education Data Project — allows users to consider access to arts education in both traditional public schools and charter schools. A user can filter the data by school type and arts enrollment, allowing for a side-by-side comparison of traditional public schools and charter schools:

California Arts Enrollment in Grades 6-12 | 2016-17



106,581
364,082 STUDENTS

660 CHARTER SCHOOLS



1,094,625
2,713,147 STUDENTS

3,074 TRADITIONAL PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Source: Create CA Arts Education Data Project.

The dashboard also shows the data by percentage of arts enrolled students who qualify for free and reduced-price lunch, as well as arts enrollment by school type (middle or high school). In addition, a user can view data on specific arts courses

offered at each school. Parents, advocates, schools and decision-makers can use this data to inform discussions and actions surrounding school choice and arts education.

Final Thoughts

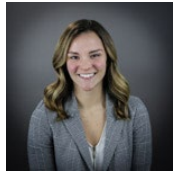
Schools, districts and states can establish a variety of policies and practices to ensure that students — regardless of whether they attend a traditional public school or school of choice — have opportunities to engage in the arts. Data dashboards allow parents to consider arts availability when making choices for their students, and strategic plans aligned with policy can provide arts opportunities to all students regardless of school or neighborhood. These emerging programs and initiatives showcase the intersection between arts education and school choice in action and offer insight to stakeholders looking to engage the arts to support students' long-term success.

For additional information about school choice, visit Education Commission of the States' [school choice resources](#). For information on arts education policies and practices, see its [arts education resources](#).

Author



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As a senior project manager for the Arts Education Partnership, Mary oversees project work plans and supports the development of AEP deliverables. Prior to joining Education Commission of the States, she worked for the Arts Education in Maryland Schools Alliance, where she served in a variety of capacities in programming, administration and policy. With over 20 years of dance training, Mary is passionate about the arts and education. Contact Mary at mdellerba@ecs.org or **202.844.6283**.

About the Arts Education Partnership



AEP at Education Commission of the States is a national coalition of more than 100 education, arts, cultural, government, business and philanthropic organizations that was created in 1995 by the National Endowment for the Arts and the U.S. Department of Education.

ENDNOTES

1. James R. Austin and Joshua A. Russell, "Charter Schools: Embracing or Excluding the Arts?," in *Diverse Methodologies in the Study of Music Teaching and Learning*, eds. Linda K. Thompson and Mark Robin Campbell (Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing, April 2008), 163-182.