Creative Solutions to Educational Inequity: Arts Education in the US

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In a memorable episode of Aaron Sorkin’s Emmy Award Winning series, *The West Wing*, fictional White House Communications Director Toby Ziegler locks horns with a Republican Congresswoman intent on completely defunding the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA). In this episode, the Congresswoman argues that it is not the taxpayer’s job to support art “that no one wants to see,” sighting an artist who had received NEA funding and used it to “destroy all his possessions in front of a Starbucks in Haight-Ashbury.” Toby’s sarcastic reply: “I’ve done that a couple of times, I didn’t realize there was funding available.”

The National Endowment for the Arts, founded in 1965 under the Johnson administration, is “an independent federal agency that funds and promotes artistic excellence, creativity, and innovation for the benefit of individuals and communities.” The NEA is advised by the President’s Committee on the Arts and Humanities (PCAH), an organization that describes itself on its website as one committed to “using the power of the arts and humanities to contribute to the vibrancy of our society, the education of our children, the creativity of our citizens and the strength of our democracy” (http://www.pcah.gov/about-us).

Both implicit and explicit in the goals of these two organizations is the idea that the health of democracy is tied to the holistic health of its citizens, which is promoted by their involvement in creative, artistic, or cultural pursuits.

Across the country policy advisors, teachers, parents, and administrators will report that the national education system is in fairly dismal shape. The national drop-out rate is consistently high for low-income students and the achievement gap between them and their middle- or high-income counterparts is ever widening. Despite decades of research projects, policy initiatives, and pilot programs, the United States continues to fail to meet the needs of its children.

Though it is often overshadowed by partisan bickering and specific controversial grants to artists, a portion of the NEA’s budget goes to funding arts education programs, both inside and outside of the classroom, each year. NEA funding in this area also goes to professional development for teachers and teaching artists. Promoting arts education is just one of many ideas about how to combat the massive national crisis in education. However, the NEA’s tactic is unique, interesting, and deserving of our discussion because of its—for lack of a better word—creative approach to promoting academic achievement and empowering students through holistic education. Expressing this sentiment in the 2007 commencement speech at Stanford University, the then Chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts, Dana Gioia, stated, “The purpose of arts education is not to produce more artists, though that is a byproduct. The real purpose of arts education is to create complete human beings capable of leading successful and productive lives in a free society.”

In 2008, then Senator and presidential candidate Barak Obama released a platform in support of the arts. In this short position statement, the Senator’s campaign dubbed him a “champion for the arts” and stated his belief that “to remain competitive in the global economy, America needs to reinvigorate the kind of creativity and innovation that has made this country great. To do so, we must nourish our children’s creative skills. In addition to giving our children the science and math skills they need to compete in the new global context, we should also encourage the ability to think creatively that comes from a meaningful arts education.” Among other things, he
promised to support increased funding for the NEA while publically championing the value of
arts education, supporting and expanding partnerships between public schools and private arts
organizations, and create an Artist Corps. This program, modeled after the Civilian
Conservation Corps of the 1930s, would train and pay young artists to work as teachers and
facilitators in low-income schools and community organizations. Despite these early promises,
no such Corps has emerged and the NEA’s annual funding has steadily dropped since 2010,
when it was awarded $167,500,000. In 2013, it only received $138,383,218, a 17% decrease
(NEA Appropriations Statistics 2014).

This is not to say that there is no positive movement in the world of arts education since the
Obama administration took office. In 2011, the President’s Committee on the Arts and
Humanities issued a report entitled “Reinvesting in Arts Education: Winning America’s Future
Through Creative Schools.” The committee investigated the current state of arts education,
collected and evaluated the results of myriad independent research projects on the subject, and
ultimately created a series of five recommendations for stakeholders across the country. While
collecting data, the committee immediately recognized two startling trends: (1) there is
considerable “diversity and dynamism” in the way schools pursue arts education across the
country and (2) there exist “persistent inequities in the distribution of arts education” (PCAH
2011, p. 11). In short, not every student receives arts education and, even amongst those who do,
there is little uniformity to the way the arts are presented in schools.

However, the committee’s review of “two decades of theory and policy recommendations”
(PCAH 2011, p. 15) found that the value of arts education is primarily discussed and portrayed
as worthwhile, not because of the intrinsic value of arts in a democracy, but because of its
perceived positive influence in other realms of education. High-quality arts education is seen to
have a positive impact on four main realms: academic achievement, student motivation and
engagement, habits of mind, and social competencies.

Research projects that suggest a consistent correlation between arts education and high academic
achievement are numerous. Seven separate studies, compiled by the Arts Education Partnership
(AEP) displayed a stark pattern: students with arts engagement had higher scores on math and
reading standardized tests (Fiske and Waldorf, 1999). A more fine-grained study produced by
Montgomery County, Maryland, found that arts-integration focused schools decreased the
achievement gap between low and middle or high income students by up to 14 percentage points
in reading and 26 percentage points in math over three years. A long-term study conducted by
UCLA tracked 25,000 students over 10 years and found that students, across socioeconomic
strata, with high arts engagement were more likely to find school interesting, graduate from high
school, and participate in community service (Catteral et al., 1999). Another study by the AEP
sought to identify the reasons for this trend and concluded that a major factor was the direct
“transfer of skills” from arts to academics (Deasy, 2002). For example, students who study
music develop spatial-temporal reasoning skills, which are also utilized in elementary math.
Students who draw or paint develop abstract visualization skills, which is critical in reading
comprehension.

Arts education also increases student motivation and engagement, which the PCAH report
describes as “improved attendance, persistence, focused attention, heightened educational
aspirations, and intellectual risk taking” (2011, p. 16). Simply put, when fun, interactive, and not explicitly “academic” activities are offered to children, even those struggling in traditional classes become more engaged and able to focus.

Arts education promotes productive “habits of mind” (PCAH 2011, p. 16), which the committee defines as creative and critical thinking skills and the ability to embrace ambiguity and complexity. The Dana Foundation undertook neuroscience research and found that arts education improves several types of cognition and develops the capacity for long-term attention to a task (Asbury and Rich, 2008).

Lastly, arts education promotes the development of social competencies, such as working in groups, social tolerance, and self-confidence. Importantly, there is often “no wrong answer” in creative pursuits, which allows students with low confidence to take risks and try hard without fear of failure. A third AEP study confirms the value of positive, inclusive environments created by arts-integrated instruction in bolstering the confidence of at-risk students (Stevenson and Deasy, 2005).

The Arts Education Partnership, which facilitated many of the recently discussed studies, is a national coalition made up of dozens of education, arts, and philanthropic groups. Similarly to the report by the PCAH, the AEP’s mission statement (2014) claims that arts education promotes “creativity, imagination and innovation, problem solving and critical thinking, communication and collaboration, academic achievement, and school, social and civic engagement.”

In addition to supporting research, the AEP is involved with actively and equitably promoting arts education across the country. They assert, “the benefits are greatest for low-income and at-risk students. Yet, students who stand to benefit the most are least likely to have access to a high quality arts education” (Mission Statement, 2014). A cycling banner on the AEP website makes four claims: (1) arts education can help close the achievement gap by increasing the intellectual engagement, self-confidence, and academic success of students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds and English language learners, (2) arts education helps prepare students for college and careers, which, in the twenty-first century will require innovative creativity, critical thinking skills, and a capacity for collaboration, (3) arts education can increase teacher retention and engagement by promoting dynamic classrooms and reducing burnout, and (4) the arts can turn around low-performing schools by engaging students and teachers, improving school climate and culture, and connecting schools to families and communities.

In 2012, the Arts Education Partnership produced a “State of the States Arts Education Policy Summary,” ranking states on a set of 13 criteria ranging from requiring teaching licenses for art teachers to including art as a core subject in the state curriculum. No state received a full score of 13 points, though nine states, including Pennsylvania, scored an 11. The only categories Pennsylvania missed were “arts requirements for high school graduation” and “arts requirement for college admissions.” This means that Pennsylvania does require continuing education for art teachers, and offers both teaching licenses and alternative certification paths. Art is considered a core academic subject and is an instructional requirement in both elementary and middle schools throughout the state.
Full-scale arts-integrated schools are defined by a curriculum that embeds arts education in “school policy and daily instructional practice” (PCAH 2011, p. 21) rather than including art classes as an “add-on.” The PCAH report gives a variety of examples of effective arts integration saying, “English learners practice English adverbs by following the directions of a dance instructor; algebra teachers help students create digital designs that demonstrate their understanding of mathematical relationships; and middle school students create and play musical instruments in the process of learning about sound and wave forms” (2011, p. 39). Thinking back to my own childhood, I can identify moments of arts integration I experienced without even noticing—my third-grade class made paper maché models of historic figures we admired and choreographed a ballet based on The Phantom Toll Booth as we read it together.

Dramatic success stories of schools that have undertaken such transformational change are on display across the country. In the 1990s, 19 elementary schools in the Chicago public school system participated in the Chicago Arts Partnership in Education (CAPE) program. Over a six-year period, these 19 schools displayed all the hallmarks of successful arts integration—they had higher average test scores and a more positive school climate. The A+ School Network, which operates in North Carolina, Oklahoma, and Arkansas, showed similar results (PCAH 2011, p. 20).

Partnerships with community arts organizations, such as theaters or museums, and with local artists, are often used to support integrated arts education. Practicing artists working as teachers, conceptualized as a kind of “hybrid professional,” can be highly effective and exciting for students. However, the PCAH reports that such programs “have been limited by insufficient resources to work long term and systematically, a lack of information and structure in the profession, and inconsistent training and certification” (PCAH 2011, p. 41). This speaks to a larger trend of inconsistent attention to such programs and the lack of a national arts education strategy.

Here in Lancaster, public schools have a variety of artistic organizations with which to partner. The Fulton Theatre offers School Day Matinees, which can be paired with workshops run by the theatre, post-show discussions, and study guides for teachers. They also offer a program called Bridges that uses story-telling, creative drama, dance, music and puppetry to empower young people and allow them to tell the stories of their own lives. Poetry Paths, a project funded in part by Franklin & Marshall and the Philadelphia Alumni Writers House, seeks to promote community engagement with the arts through public instillations of paired poems and visual art pieces. Poetry Paths also facilitates in-school creative-writing workshops and is working to produce a curriculum of creative-writing activities to work in partnerships with the pieces of installed art throughout the city.

Since its inception, the NEA has given out over four billion dollars in grants to support artists across the country. Its budget, however, is decided annually in the complex negotiating two-step that is Congress’s Appropriations Bill. Though the NEA makes up only a miniscule fraction of federal discretionary spending—0.012% or about one one-hundredth of one percent—it seems to cause partisan controversy and grandstanding with surprising frequency.
Back in the world of the West Wing, Sorkin’s heavy-handed liberal soap-boxing peaks when Toby throws up his hands and declares, “there is a connection between the progress of a society and progress in the arts. The age of Pericles was also the age of Phidius. The age of Lorenzo de Medici was also the age of Leonardo da Vinci. The age of Elizabeth was also the age of Shakespeare.” Despite the over-scripted dramatic bluster, Sorkin manages to strike a tone resonant with the philosophy that has guided the National Endowment for Arts since its foundation. It is a philosophy that motivates its political base, but does little to articulate the tangible, immediate benefits of consistent, meaningful support of the arts.

The research available regarding the positive outcomes of arts education, however, supports the idea that arts education has the capacity to significantly effect the lives of students, teachers, and communities while promoting quality education, personal growth, and civic values. Yet art classes are often the first to be cut during budget contractions and the national debate on NEA funding does little to contribute positive insight to the situation. Meanwhile, local governments and small communities across the country are confronting the challenge on a grassroots level.
Works Sited


President’s Committee on the Arts and Humanities. (2011). Reinvesting in Arts Education: Winning America’s Future Through Creative Schools. Washington, DC.