A Renewed Look at Arts Education Policies

Arts education policy has long been part of the education conversation at the state level: arts councils, state associations, state education agencies, legislators, governors, and state board members frequently engage in these conversations. The discussions among these stakeholders are often joined by strong voices from business leaders, parents, the entertainment industry, and the general public. Valid and reliable research in multiple areas makes it clear that the arts are a seminal component to a healthy individual and a thriving society. However, the conversations are complicated by a number of tension points within which the arts exist, and policymakers and educators alike should understand these tensions in order to fully grasp the important role of the arts in an educated person.

This Policy Update 1) examines five of these tension points that provide a context for the place of the arts in our society in general and schools in particular; 2) presents the policy positions related to the arts that have been developed over the years by NASBE and the Arts Education Partnership (AEP); 3) gives examples of strong and innovative arts education policies currently in place in several states; 4) describes two significant arts education resources of particular interest to policymakers, including a state-level arts policy database; and 5) looks ahead to new arts education resources that NASBE, in partnership with AEP, will be developing in the near future.

The Context for Arts Education

The arts (and artists, musicians, actors, and writers) have long had a precarious relationship with society, sometimes having strong support from governments, the aristocracy, and religious institutions, sometimes being denigrated and mistrusted. Historically, arts education often took place through apprenticeships, workshops, and mentor-mentee relationships rather than in schools. Today, arts education is a common piece of the school curriculum and arts pedagogy continues to be refined, but its relationship with the larger education system is still precarious—and the tensions within the field contribute significantly to this position.

First is the tension between integration and independent discipline. The arts are strongly interdisciplinary by their very nature, and as such there are those that espouse integrating the arts throughout the curriculum. This helps all students come into contact with arts education. The detractors say it waters down the arts and it is difficult to track the quality of instruction and instructor. Both of these groups, however, agree that the arts deserve the dignity and respect of being seen as an autonomous discipline, in and of itself, worthy of intensive study for its own sake.

Second, historically some see arts education as having flourished more within a whole-child education philosophy where environment, relationships, and instructional quality are the most highly valued assessment criteria. Hence, they view standards-based education as cheapening the educative potential of the arts. Others argue that our current immersion in standards-based education provides an opportunity for the arts to finally earn their place on par with the other core disciplines. For instance, art educators have demonstrated their ability to create multiple assessment types, conduct rubric norming across teacher groups, and develop effective professional learning opportunities for arts education professionals—all activities that other subject areas have grappled with. In addition, the arts are succeeding in identifying discrete, quantifiable measures that assess focused, rigorous, and age-appropriate standards.

Third, a segment of the public and of the education community perceive the arts as “not for everyone,” arguing that some people are talented and enjoy participating in them as entertainment, bolstering their self-esteem and confidence. Others reason that all people in our culture are constantly immersed in the arts and with aesthetic concerns, whether through web page designs, muzak, commercials, or our natural and built environments, thus making awareness of the arts and its impact on our thinking, behavior, and emotions all the more warranted.
Fourth, the arts are caught between the intense focus on reading and math education and the call for 21st century skills and education across the full spectrum of human endeavors. Some believe that a student must learn the basics first before moving to other areas. Others, citing brain-based research, believe that a full, enriched environment with multiple, simultaneous stimulations create great learning.

Finally, arts advocates both in and out of education find themselves trying to justify arts’ existence because of its contribution to the economic good—to which it adds significantly—or because of its important role in contributing to a common understanding of our culture.

State Actions Regarding Arts Education Policy

With these dynamics always in the forefront of the arts education discussion, state policy has received significant attention to promote the arts as an essential part of a complete and internationally competitive education for our children, including in recommendations and positions from national organizations such as NASBE and the Arts Education Partnership (see page 3).

Several individual states have also made great headway in creating quality arts education experiences. As AEP’s State of the States 2012 demonstrates, some policy areas have received more attention than others. For example, all states but one have produced elementary and/or secondary arts standards and 32 states have listed the arts as a core or academic subject. In addition, 45 states have identified an arts instructional requirement for elementary students and 27 states require arts credits in order for high school graduation, although only 18 states require assessment of learning in arts classes. Finally, 37 states expect prospective non-arts specialists to receive some postsecondary arts training for licensure.

Even within those broad topics, state-level policy can, of course, be crafted in many shapes and sizes. Each state approaches arts education policies differently dependent on the governmental and political infrastructure present in that particular state. To illustrate these varied approaches, consider the variety of ways that Arkansas, Colorado, and Iowa approach the concept of ensuring children’s access to arts education, structuring what arts content is taught within the state, and specifying what arts knowledge is required for an educator in their state.

Arkansas

Few states have taken as strong a stance as Arkansas when it comes to mandating an arts education for its elementary school students. As of July 2005, every public elementary school is required to provide at least 40 minutes of both music and visual arts instruction every week. In addition, as part of an effort to ensure the equity of educational access for all students, secondary schools are required to provide their students with the opportunity to study and participate in the visual and performing arts. To ensure that this occurs, high school students must receive a half credit in the fine arts to graduate and all high schools must provide at least three-and-a-half credits annually to maintain their state accreditation.

However, in Arkansas not just any teacher can provide that mandated elementary arts instruction—music and visual arts instruction must be provided by a licensed teacher who has met licensure requirements for that particular discipline. Also, all general classroom teacher candidates must complete a set of general education requirements that includes the arts. Finally, to provide guidance to arts educators across Arkansas, the state has developed a set of standards that specify what should be learned by students not only in their music and visual arts classes but also in their dance and drama classes.

Colorado

Colorado is a strong example of a “local control” state. Dedicated to ensuring that localities have the flexibility to teach their students in the most appropriate manner, the state dictates relatively little to its districts and schools. For instance, although the state “strongly encourages” local districts to provide an education that includes and emphasizes the importance of the arts, it does not require that the arts be taught nor are the arts a required element in the development of district-specific graduation requirements (although the state does indicate that the arts “should” be a component). This is likely reflective of the fact that the arts are not listed as one of the core academic subjects (identified as mathematics, science, reading, and writing).

But even though the state does not require the arts be taught, the arts do have a prominent place in the educational policies in Colorado. Specifically, Colorado recently completed a comprehensive planning and redevelopment of the academic standards for the state’s children. These standards recognize 12 academic content areas, four of which represent artistic disciplines (dance, drama and theatre arts, music, and visual arts). In addition, educators seeking a license to teach are required to be knowledgeable in music and the visual arts.

Iowa

Iowa has taken a slightly different tack when it comes to arts education. Similar to many states, Iowa requires all students in grades 1 through 8 to participate in both a music and visual arts education, as well as mandating that all high school students receive at least three credits in the arts (including dance, music, theatre, and the visual arts). However, unlike every other state in the nation, Iowa has not developed stan-
NASBE’s Positions and Policy Recommendations Regarding the Arts

NASBE facilitates the creation of public education positions that surface from its membership and are approved by a majority of the state delegates at its annual business meeting. The following positions related directly to the arts:

1. **Standards Creation:** States should create academic standards in all key subject areas at all levels, Pre-K 12, including standards for both content and student performance. Key subject areas should include fine arts. (1997)

2. **Education Reform:** Call for school improvement plans to include a broader range of adequate yearly progress metrics, such as in the arts. (2011)

3. **Core Curriculum:** All students should have knowledge and expertise in broad curricular areas, including Fine Arts, to help young people develop their creative and critical abilities and understand the relationships between the arts, other disciplines, and society, and promote personal expression. (1988; rev. 1998)

4. **Career Education:** State school systems should provide meaningful opportunities for all students to engage in rigorous and relevant career and technical education…actively working to provide a range of experiences that expose students to career-related clusters such as the performing arts. (2009)

In addition, a NASBE study group, consisting of state board members from across the country, examined the arts as part of the “lost curriculum,” and recommended these arts-related policy actions for state boards:

1. Adopt high-quality licensure requirements for the arts.
2. Ensure adequate time for high-quality professional development.
3. Ensure adequate staff expertise in the arts and designated staff focused solely on the arts at the state education agency.
4. Incorporate the arts into core graduation requirements, while simultaneously increasing the number of credits required for graduation.
5. Encourage higher education institutions to include arts when calculating high school grade point averages.
6. Incorporate arts in the early years into standards, curriculum frameworks, and course requirements.
7. Advocate continued development of curriculum materials for the arts.
8. Urge Congress and legislatures to make a greater [financial] commitment to the arts.

The Arts Education Partnership’s (AEP) Policies Areas that Strengthen Arts Education

The AEP’s State of the States 2012: Arts Education Policy Summary provides a table of strong state-level arts education policy areas and states that have adopted some form of policy addressing the issue. The following are adapted from those 13 areas.

1. **The arts as a priority**
   a. Define arts as a core academic subject.
   b. Adopt arts education standards for all levels including early learning.

2. **Instruction and assessment**
   a. Provide or offer arts instruction in one or more arts disciplines at the elementary, middle and secondary levels.
   b. Require course credits in the arts for high school graduation or include arts courses as an alternative requirement as well as for admission to any of its public colleges or universities.
   c. Assess student learning in the arts.

3. **Teachers**
   a. Specify arts requirements for initial licensure/certification of generalist classroom teachers.
   b. Specify requirements for endorsement, licensure, or certification—including alternative routes—of arts teachers or arts specialists in one or more arts disciplines.
   c. Require continuing education or recertification of arts teachers.
dards for arts education, which it has done for some other subjects such as mathematics and literacy, although it does allow local districts to develop their own arts standards. Similarly, the state does not require that educators have postsecondary coursework in or familiarity with the arts.

**Resources**

There are two powerful resources that provide state-level policymakers with research and policy examples in arts education.

**ArtsEdSearch** is essentially an online research database focused on arts learning that can take place anytime, anywhere. The database contains links to high-quality research as well as citation-rich summaries of research on a given topic. It is organized into four sections: outcomes for students; outcomes for teachers; outcomes for in-school arts education; and outcomes for out-of-school arts education. Each of those sections is subdivided into 1) a summary overview of all the research; 2) a categorization of the research by age level; 3) a discussion of policy implications; and 4) a direct link to pertinent studies on that issue.

For state board members, this tool can answer research-oriented questions around topics of current interest, including:

- Where can I find reliable research to cite in support of arts policy that can help close the achievement gap?
- What are the components of teacher quality that research says professional learning in the arts develop?
- Where can I get a brief, reader-friendly overview of the arts and college and career readiness?
- How do the benefits of arts education change over the course of children’s development?

A second resource of value to state board of education members is AEP’s State Policy Database. This searchable database tracks the latest information on state policies that support learning and teaching in the arts. There are two interwoven sections to this database: 1) choosing specific state(s) to research and 2) choosing the policy element(s) of interest. Users can select all states and one policy element, vice versa, and any number of other combinations.

For state board members, this tool can answer policy-oriented questions around topics of current interest, including:

- What state(s) have the most comprehensive array of policies in support of arts education?
- What are the policies currently in place in my state regarding the arts?
- In what policy areas is my state lacking?
- What should I know about arts education policies related to teacher training that affect not only arts teachers, but generalist teachers and teachers of other disciplines?

**Future NASBE Resources**

Currently in development through a joint venture between NASBE and AEP is a policy resource portal on NASBE’s website that will link a selection of non-arts education issues (e.g., college readiness, career readiness, closing the achievement gap, equity, teacher quality) to ways arts education can help states achieve their goals in these areas. These connections are already touched on in ArtsEdSearch (see the “Policy Implications” tab), but the portal currently under development will focus on specific authorities generally held by state boards of education. The issues will be selected for their prominence in current state board strategic plans and include links to pertinent research detailing how arts education can support these broader educational goals.

Finally, the resource portal will outline the necessary policy elements to consider under each broader topic by providing essential questions for state boards to consider in moving policy forward. In this way, a state board can support arts education in particular and more fully accomplish its strategic goals in general.

The NASBE/AEP policy portal is scheduled to go live in the late fall of 2013.

**References**


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