

The Trickle-Down Effect of Federal Arts Education Policy



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This article was originally published as part of a four-week Arts Education Forum on [Barry's Blog](#). Leaders from the field of arts education responded to various questions in the areas of: 1) field-building 2) practice 3) policy and 4) research. The following article responds to the question: **Many contend that arts education advocacy has largely been a failure. Others disagree. Where are the successes?**

Not long into my tenure at the U.S. Department of Education during the Clinton administration, I came to understand the limits of what the federal government can do for K-12 education.

At the time, the Department boosted funding to support the hiring of 100,000 new teachers and the launch of a new national after-school initiative, an initiative that is now a \$1.1 billion program. Arts teachers were among the 100,000 new hires and many of the after-school programs embraced the arts. Federal investment had an important impact. But many arts education advocates would not rank these two accomplishments as major successes. Why? Because a new arts teacher and a new arts after-school program did not appear in every school in every community.

We all need to remember that the federal share in total education spending is only 11 cents on the dollar. The remaining funds come from state and local sources.

Which brings me to federal policy.

The single most powerful provision in federal education law benefitting arts education is the designation of the arts as a “core academic subject” in the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). This allows schools to use federal funds to support arts teachers, arts programs, and services provided by local cultural organizations. Even more importantly, the designation also sends an essential policy signal. It affirms the value of the arts as an area of instruction. This is why Americans for the Arts, and our national advocacy partners, have worked so hard to protect this designation from being weakened or removed.

It appears to me that the secret to being effective lies in vertically integrating our federal, state, and local advocacy strategies. It's a complex web of jurisdictions and policy inputs that

determine whether and how a public school student in a given school gets formal training in, and through, the arts. We cannot hope to make change for every public school student unless we begin to work to impact the system as a whole. Pushing the lever on federal policy---while critical---in and of itself is not enough. **We have to concentrate on impacting federal policy that can impact state administration that can in turn affect local implementation.**

Federal Strategies

Americans for the Arts hosts more than 80 national arts and arts education groups at the annual Arts Advocacy Day as part of the ongoing effort to influence K-12 federal education legislation. We are working in a narrow space. NCLB (otherwise known as the Elementary & Secondary Education Act, or ESEA) became law in early 2002, and there hasn't been a major K-12 education law passed since then—just short-term grant opportunities funded through appropriations bills. Reauthorization of ESEA, which is now several years beyond its intended shelf life, has become that piece of legislation always “expected” to be considered, but which fails to be because of Congressional dysfunction and the electoral calendar.

Our federal advocacy opportunities, however, are much larger than ESEA reauthorization. Recently, the White House and U.S. Department of Education have taken a number of important, and independent, steps to advance arts education. I believe that the [report](#) recently issued by the President's Committee on the Arts & Humanities represents the broadest and most detailed statement of support for arts education from any administration in recent history. The President and First Lady have hosted a half dozen arts education events and the White House recently highlighted the work of 14 arts education “Champions of Change” on its [web site](#). This year, the U.S. Department of Education is spending more on direct arts education projects than ever before through the Investing in Innovation and the Arts in Education programs. In early 2012 the Department will release the full results of the Fast Response Survey System [report](#)—the most comprehensive look at the status of arts education in our nation's public schools since 1999.

At Americans for the Arts we continue to work to convince the Department of Education to include measures of the arts in their national research efforts and in their school turnaround efforts. (We think that arts education can lead school turnaround through individual student turnaround.) We continue to ask for an end to the narrowing of the curriculum, for less of an emphasis on summative testing and for the use of multiple measures to gauge student achievement. We work with science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) leaders to find ways to bring in the arts and concentrate on strategic alliances to make it happen, alliances like our work with the American Association of School Administrators and The Conference Board on research like the [Ready to Innovate: Are Educators and Executives Aligned on the Creative Readiness of the U.S. Workforce?](#) report.

But all of this work—if confined only to the federal level—will not be enough to get where we need to go. As articulated by the Stanford Social Innovation Review in a recent [article](#) on how foundations, and others, can evaluate advocacy, “Successful advocacy projects must simultaneously pursue opportunities at the local, state, and federal level, as well as across governmental institutions.”

State & Local Strategies

That’s why we have been so focused on building a state and local advocacy network to integrate with our federal network. In 2009 we took an important step forward when the Kennedy Center Alliance for Arts Education Network joined our State Arts Action [Network](#). Together these 73 organizations reach arts education leaders and advocates in 47 states. Our Arts Education Council and [Network](#) connects the statewide work to the local level, to decision-makers, community organizations, and the general public. It was the combined effort and impact of this federal, state, and local nexus that recently helped advocates in [Pasco County, FL](#), [Transylvania, NC](#) and [San Diego, CA](#) win their battles to keep arts education alive even as other communities underwent grueling budget cuts.

Investing in Change

The challenge, not surprisingly, is sustaining financial support for this work. Many funders mistakenly equate advocacy with partisan lobbying—and shy away from supporting work that could help advance shared public policy goals. I think that our field could and should do a better job of helping funders overcome this barrier, explaining why advocacy is needed and why as decision-maker education it is fundamentally different from lobbying. As the seminal 2008 [report](#) from The Atlantic Philanthropies stated, “...funding advocacy too often is the philanthropic road not taken, yet it is a road most likely to lead to the kind of lasting change that philanthropy has long sought through other kinds of grants.”

We need our private sector partners who care about arts education to support advocacy for the issue as strongly as their colleagues in the larger education arena support advocacy on behalf of education reform. Arts education will not simply materialize in every school– it will emerge when thoughtful and directed resources at the federal, state and local levels have been aligned to make it possible.

I hope we can work together to realize this vision.