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Educating Ourselves about Childhood Arts Experiences—and Why They Matter

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A new report from the National Endowment for the Arts re-affirms what we have learned from many other previous studies—namely, that arts education is closely linked with positive academic outcomes and social and emotional development.

The report appears in the wake of new data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), based on survey questions that researchers from the Arts Endowment and NCES co-designed last year. That survey provides estimates of how much arts education is currently being offered by public schools nationwide.

Taken together, the two resources speak volumes about the varying degrees of access to arts learning opportunities that America's children enjoy, and the measurable benefits of arts education for children of different ages and backgrounds.

The Arts, Social Skills Development, and Academic Achievement

The Art Endowment research report, *Snapshots of Arts Education in Childhood and Adolescence: Access and Outcomes*

[/impact/research/publications/snapshots-arts-education-childhood-and-adolescence](https://www.arts.gov/impact/research/publications/snapshots-arts-education-childhood-and-adolescence), gauges the presence of arts education in young people's lives. It examines three longitudinal datasets from NCES, looking at the period from early childhood (toddlerhood through kindergarten) to age groups slightly older (first through fifth grade), before vaulting ahead to students enrolled in high school.

By following these groups of children through time, the researchers derive conclusions not only about the availability of arts experiences to children in and out of school, but also their participation in arts learning, and how these experiences support healthy development and academic progress.

Here are some of the high-level findings:

- At-home arts engagement of toddlers, preschoolers, and kindergarteners was positively correlated with a variety of social-emotional attributes and cognitive outcomes.

- Participation in out-of-school arts activities was positively correlated with many social-emotional attributes and academic outcomes for children from kindergarten through fifth grade.
- Among high schoolers, arts participation was positively correlated with social-emotional attributes during ninth grade, while arts course completion was linked with greater academic achievement, high school graduation, and post-graduation outcomes.

Translation? Let's start with early childhood. Researchers found that parents who consistently sang songs and read books to their infants were more likely to interact with them in ways that supported the development of social competence, secure attachment, and cognitive skills—compared with parents who did not engage in those arts activities.

Among toddlers, arts engagement was associated with stronger parent-child relationships. Preschool-age children who consistently participated in any type of arts activity had higher scores on academic assessments (reading, math, and language) than children not engaged in those activities. Moreover, kindergarteners who participated in arts activities at home were seen to exhibit positive, pro-social behavior.

From kindergarten through fifth grade, meanwhile, children's participation in out-of-school arts activities (e.g., taking an arts class or lesson or attending a concert, play, or show) was associated with the following social-emotional attributes as reported by teachers: positive approaches to learning; greater interpersonal skills; and lower rates of exhibiting internalized or externalized problem behaviors.

At each grade level from kindergarten through fifth grade, taking arts classes outside school was positively linked to reading, math, and science scores. In-school arts participation, by contrast, was positively linked with math and science scores only among third- through fifth-graders and with reading scores only among fourth- and fifth-graders. Some of these relationships proved inconsistent, however, when researchers accounted for students' demographic and family characteristics.

The results for high schoolers were even more impressive—especially on the academic front. High school participation in extracurricular arts activities was generally associated with positive outcomes as recorded by math scores, high school GPAs, high school graduation, and college GPAs. As for coursework, the completion of fine arts credits was related to higher cumulative GPAs in all core content areas (i.e., English Language Arts, Math, Science, Social Studies) in high school.

Further, the number of fine arts credits completed was associated with a far higher likelihood of obtaining a high school diploma or equivalent, compared with students who did not complete arts credits. Among students who pursued higher education, there was a positive relationship between the number of arts credits taken in high school and first-year college GPAs.

The Arts Endowment publication is based on analytical reports and tables that were produced for the agency by RMC Research Corp. These will be posted to the agency's website in coming months. The datasets under analysis covered the years 2001-2018.

In addition to discussing the arts' benefits for student learning in general, the report quantifies levels of arts access and participation by children of different backgrounds. The findings show “the state of play” (pun intended) for childhood arts learning in the years before the COVID-19 pandemic.

State of Play for Arts Education: Presence in K-12 Schools

Offering a more current outlook, NCES at the U.S. Department of Education has just released the first wave of results from the School Pulse Panel Survey <<https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/spp/results.asp>>. Last year, Arts Endowment researchers worked with NCES to design the survey's question-items about arts education.

The School Pulse Panel Survey is administered to a representative sample of more than 4,000 public K-12 public school in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and the territories. Principals receive a 30-minute, online questionnaire once a month. In November 2024, they reported on a range of school characteristics, including whether standalone classes in arts education are provided, in what subjects, and by what type of instructors and for how many hours per week.

The principals were also asked whether their schools required students to take an arts class, what types of arts learning opportunities they provide to students outside school hours, with what types of organizations they partner in offering such opportunities, and whether the principals are satisfied with various resources their schools use in supporting arts education.

But the most illuminating aspect of the survey is how the data permit us to compare these responses across different types of school, geography, and student population. For example, although 73 percent of public schools offering standalone art classes require students to take “at least one music, visual arts, media arts, dance, or drama/theater class,” that number is considerably higher in the Northeast region of the U.S. (82 percent) and lower in the Western states (63 percent).

Arts education is also far more likely to be mandatory in elementary school than in middle schools. Roughly 79 percent of elementary schools that offer standalone classes also require their students to take at least one, while only 60 percent of middle schools offering arts classes have such a requirement.

Both the smallest schools (those with fewer than 300 students) and the largest schools (those with more than 1,000) offering standalone classes were among the least likely to impose arts education requirements; 68 percent of each group did so (versus 73 percent of all public schools). And, not surprisingly, schools in the highest poverty areas had lower rates of imposing such requirements (with 70 percent of them doing so) than did schools in less poor areas (74 percent)—assuming they offered standalone arts classes to begin with.

These statistics come from an interactive data tool on the survey webpage. Full data tables and technical documentation are also available.

There, you will note discrepancies in school music and visual arts access in terms of local economic conditions (87 percent and 84 percent of schools located in low-poverty areas offer standalone classes in music and visual arts, respectively, compared with 72 percent and 73 percent of high-poverty area schools). You will also find that marching band, band, or choir practice outside the school day are far more prevalent in suburban and rural area schools—of which 52 percent and 44 percent, respectively, offer those activities—than in city schools (37 percent).

At the national level, reliable and consistent data on arts education access and enrollment have proved difficult to obtain. Solely from this perspective, the School Pulse Panel survey is an invaluable asset. But both studies considered in this post—the new NCES survey and the Arts Endowment’s Snapshots report—can help arts educators, arts organizations, and state education departments to identify critical gaps in service and to strengthen public understanding about the arts’ relationships to factors such as school readiness and academic performance.

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