SNAPSHOT

- American public schools with higher concentrations of poverty are less likely to offer music, visual arts, and theater instruction than those with lower concentrations of poverty.
- In New York City, schools with the least access to arts education also have the lowest graduation rates.

ARTS EDUCATION IMPROVES STUDENT OUTCOMES

When students are involved in the arts (including visual art, music, dance, and theater), they experience better outcomes in school attendance, academic achievement, and participation in school leadership. Arts participation also leads to increased civic engagement in adulthood, including higher rates of volunteering and voting. A National Endowment for the Arts study found that students with low socioeconomic status (SES) in particular experience improved outcomes in school and beyond when involved in the arts: low SES students with high participation in the arts are more likely to graduate from high school (96% compared to 78% among their counterparts with low arts participation), and is also correlated with a higher likelihood of earning a bachelor's degree and of working in a professional field (e.g., law, medicine, or education).

PRIORITIZING ARTS IN POLICIES AND BUDGETS

Funding for arts in schools is impacted by a number of factors related to educational funding more broadly. Local school districts rely primarily on property taxes for funding. This can result in large disparities between districts, so many states have moved towards centralized funding models to distribute funds, which may address these gaps. Federal funds can also help offset wealth disparities between districts, yet funding may be tied to academic performance. From 2001 to 2015, the largest pool of federal K-12 funding was tied to school performance on mandated standardized tests that focused on reading/language arts and math, and both federal and state policies have provided rewards or imposed sanctions on schools depending on test performance. As a result, some schools direct their scarce resources toward tested disciplines at the expense of other subjects like the arts. There are some signs that this may be changing, however. In 2015, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) elevated the role of the arts as part of a ‘well-rounded education’ and granted states greater flexibility in determining which disciplines are included in performance assessments, providing an opportunity for states to prioritize arts education in their required updated plans.

Both New York State and New York City already have arts education requirements focused on providing instruction by certified arts teachers. The New York State Education Department (NYSED) is currently working to finalize its draft ESSA plan, which includes expanding access to arts in schools. In addition, NYSED recently published a draft of its Strategic Plan for the Arts to guide and support the inclusion of the arts as part of a well-rounded education throughout the state.

STEM TO STEAM

The STEM to STEAM movement among educators and advocacy groups aims to add “Arts” to the interdisciplinary educational approach of “Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics,” or STEM. While the focus of STEM has been to prepare students to work in increasingly relevant and demanding fields, there has been a push in recent years to include the arts in this framework. STEAM advocates cite the arts as a crucial component of creativity and innovation that is currently missing from STEM education. Some proponents of STEAM include both art and design within the “A” of the acronym. Others use “A” to refer to a broad spectrum of liberal arts, including language arts and social studies. Regardless of what is included in the definition, the purpose of STEAM is to help students develop creative thinking skills to enhance learning across disciplines. In addition, prioritizing STEAM education can make access to the arts more equitable for students of all backgrounds.
GAPS IN THE DATA

Currently the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) arts assessment is the only nationwide evaluation of student performance in the arts. Critiques of this assessment find it limited because it focuses only on visual arts and music, it only assesses eighth grade students, and it does not capture school or local data. Some cultural researchers also question the validity of quantitative arts assessments considering the experiential and subjective nature of learning in the arts, although others suggest that traditional test-based approaches can work if supplemented by a broader range of measurement tools. Overall, however, arts education data may improve as states implement their updated assessment plans under ESSA.

The NYC Comptroller’s Report highlights the fact that the data that are currently collected on NYC public schools do not include information about how individual schools distribute their funding, specifically how much money is devoted to arts education. The lack of data on funding distributions makes it difficult to identify funding needs and priorities, both for individual schools and for the system as a whole.

GAPS IN ARTS EDUCATION IN NYC SCHOOLS

Applying the new statewide arts education expansion strategy in New York City will be a challenge considering many schools do not even meet the current arts requirements: the NYC Comptroller’s 2014 State of the Arts report found that more than one quarter (28%) of public schools lack a single full-time certified arts teacher, and one-in-five (20%) do not even have a part-time certified arts teacher. To supplement and bridge gaps in arts instruction, the New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE) encourages schools to tap into the city’s rich arts community and establish partnerships with arts and cultural organizations. In the 2015-2016 school year, however, one quarter of high schools (25%) lacked such partnerships.

There are also geographic disparities in arts education: schools lacking certified art teachers and partnerships with arts organizations are concentrated in the South Bronx and Central Brooklyn, two of the areas where children are most at risk of economic, health, and housing insecurity in New York City. Among schools that have neither a certified arts teacher nor community partnerships, almost half (47%) are located in these two areas, despite these areas containing only 31% of all NYC public schools.

RECENT NYCDOE ARTS EDUCATION INITIATIVES

In 2014, NYC Mayor Bill de Blasio announced a $23 million initiative to create competitive funding programs aimed at helping schools bolster their arts programming. Schools can now apply for an Arts Continuum grant to build partnerships and programming that bridge gaps in arts instruction that occur as students transition from elementary to middle school. In the 2016-17 school year, the Arts Continuum had 52 participating schools, more than half of which were in the Bronx or Brooklyn. Another arts partnership grant available to NYC schools is the Arts for English Language Learners [ELLs] and Students with Disabilities [SWD], which funds arts and school-based arts residency partnerships with local arts organizations, expanding arts education for NYC schoolchildren who are ELLs or SWD in 191 schools in 2016-17. The Turnaround Arts competitive grant program funds a three-year partnership in four Central Brooklyn schools to build and integrate arts education into school culture.

To address the need for more qualified arts teachers in NYC schools, the Lincoln Center Scholars Alternative Certification Program trains and state-certifies arts teachers working at NYC schools, tuition-free. The accessibility of the Lincoln Scholars Program has the potential to broaden the pool of certified arts teachers in New York City, which could in turn expose public school students to a more diverse range of backgrounds and experiences in the classroom.