



A Collective Vision for Equity in Arts Education

The Arts Education Alliance remains committed and aligned in our efforts to provide our students, educators, and communities with a high-quality arts education.

Our organizations have partnered to champion one core principle: **Arts are essential.**

The Arts Education Alliance closely monitors policy developments at the federal level that could impact arts educators and students nationwide. With discussions around the future of the U.S. Department of Education, and the many federal grant programs the arts community relies on, our unified advocacy is more important than ever. We are committed to working together to protect funding, increase access, and advocate for policies that support arts educators and students. **We remain committed to our collective mission and shared efforts to:**

- ▶ **Ensure every student** has access to a high-quality arts education as part of a well-rounded curriculum.
- ▶ **Support educators** by advocating for the resources, materials, space, and time needed for meaningful learning.
- ▶ **Champion certified arts educators** by urging districts to employ credentialed teachers and providing clear pathways for arts educators to obtain certification in their discipline.

Shared Advocacy Agenda

FEDERAL ROLE IN EDUCATION

The federal role in education as it stands today was not fully established until 1965 with the passage of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) and the Higher Education Act. These laws established programs to address critical issues such as elementary and secondary education in low-income schools and communities (Title I) and financial assistance for students attending postsecondary institutions. More than 10 years later, in 1979, the Department of Education (ED, 2025) was established with the official mission of “[promoting] student achievement and preparation for global competitiveness by fostering educational excellence and ensuring equal access” (para. 1).

Today, ED hosts a wide range of programs to support students and educators alike, with the bulk of its funding committed to their original goal of advancing broad access to high-quality education. Despite the breadth of programs administered by ED, the federal government’s contribution to education funding is relatively small. With the bulk of funding coming from state (45%) and local (44%) sources, the federal government contributes roughly 11% of total education funding (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023).

FEDERAL ROLE IN ARTS EDUCATION

The inclusion of the arts within America's educational system can be traced as far back as the early 1800s with Baltimore, Philadelphia, and Cleveland being some of the first cities to include the arts in their general curriculum.

At the federal level, the arts and music were officially recognized as components of a well-rounded education with the passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which reauthorized ESEA in 2015. This law enabled schools and districts to use **Title I, Title II, Title IV-A** and additional federal funding sources to support the integration of dance, media arts, music, theatre, and visual arts throughout other subject areas. The passage of ESSA also established the **Assistance for Arts Education** program, which was the first federal program to focus solely on the arts. In 2024, U.S. Deputy Secretary Cindy Marten's Letter to Chief State School Officers clarified the use of federal funds for arts education under **Titles I, II, III, and IV-A**, of ESSA, the Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act, and the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). This reaffirmed ED's focus on the importance of arts education and the availability of federal funding needed to support these programs.

Federal funding streams have helped increase the availability of the arts in schools, but a significant number of students across the country still lack access to in-school arts education. In particular, students in low-income and urban areas generally lack access to the full breadth and benefits of a comprehensive arts education. In a 2019 report, the Arts Education Data Project revealed that only 15% of schools across the nation offer instruction in three arts disciplines, and only 9% of schools offer instruction in four or more arts disciplines (Morrison et al., 2022). The report also stated that schools with a high proportion of students who were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch were nearly twice as likely to offer no arts education (Morrison et al., 2022). These statistics show a clear disparity in access to arts education for students from low-income families while highlighting the need for increased federal assistance to ensure equal access to these programs. Engaging in the arts can be an enriching experience for all students by offering creative outlets and exciting new opportunities for engaging with their peers. Students from low-income backgrounds often benefit from arts engagement, with studies reporting positive effects on grades, test scores, graduation rates, college enrollment, and even civic engagement (Catterall, 2012, p. 24). Increased funding for programs, such as **Title I**, would directly support high-need schools by closing educational gaps in the arts for students from low-income families, while programs, such as **Title IV-A**, would increase access to a well-rounded education that includes the arts.

Defining the Arts

When referred to in this document, the "arts" are defined as dance, media arts, music, theatre, and visual arts. This definition, while not comprehensive of all arts subjects, encompasses the five disciplines most commonly taught in schools. At the federal level, there is currently no formal definition of the "arts." While ESSA enumerates music and the "arts" as subjects included as part of a well-rounded education, the legislation failed to provide a definition of what the "arts" entail. The closest definition of the "arts" within federal law comes from a 2015 Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee report by stating, in reference to core academic subjects, that the "arts may include dance, media arts, music, theatre, and visual arts" (U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions, 2016, p. 52). While this definition was not included in the final legislation that became ESSA, it does show an intent by Congress to encompass the full breadth of arts disciplines under the new well-rounded scope.

Without formal definition in federal law, interpretation of the "arts" is left to the states, who typically interpret "music and the arts" as strictly music and visual arts, thus restricting federal funds from being utilized to support other arts disciplines. Without reliable access to federal funding streams, dance, theatre, and media arts programs are often underfunded and, in many cases, are entirely absent from a school's curriculum. This trend is also highlighted in the Arts Education Data Project report, which identified 82% of U.S. students as having access to music programs and 85% of students as having access to visual arts programs, with only 35% and 15% of students having access to theatre and dance education programs, respectively (Morrison et al., 2022).

Fortunately, there are several methods to amend the definition of the “arts” to include all major arts disciplines, which would allow all disciplines to benefit from federal funding streams. One method would be for Congress to pass the legislation to provide a formal definition of the arts within federal law to clarify the eligibility of these disciplines to receive federal education funds.

Baseline Experience for Educators

Our country finds itself in the midst of a growing teacher shortage, which has been steadily building for decades and finally reached a critical point during the COVID-19 pandemic. Whether this is due to low pay, high student loan debt, burnout, or a combination of factors, educators are leaving the classroom at alarming rates. Additionally, fewer individuals are now entering the profession, thus leaving vacant positions unfilled. These issues of recruitment and retention are felt across subject areas, but they are especially pervasive within music and arts spaces. The Teacher Shortage Area report conducted by ED (2024) identified 15 states, including the District of Columbia, that are facing arts educator shortages. While these shortages are widespread, they disproportionately impact students from low-income areas and students with disabilities. Programs such as **Title II** and **IDEA** would support educators in providing high-quality instruction to those historically disadvantaged populations, while legislation, such as the **Reimagining Inclusive Arts Education Act**, would work to bolster ED’s capacity to offer best practices and training for educators working with students within those demographics.

To stem the flow of arts educators leaving the profession, the underlying factors contributing to their attrition must be addressed first. According to a study focused on educator attrition, the main contributing factors for educators leaving the profession were due to low compensation and overall well-being (ED, 2024). In the report, educators expressed they felt underpaid compared to their similarly credentialed peers, in addition to feeling overworked for the compensation they received. These compounding factors have led to widespread burnout within the education environment, thus forcing current educators out of the profession, who then dissuade potential new educators from joining the workforce. To alleviate the stresses of current educators, in addition to making the teaching profession more attractive to prospective educators, the issues of low pay and teacher burnout must be addressed. To address these issues, legislation such as the **Pay Teachers Act** would establish a national minimum salary for educators, while the **Supporting the Mental Health of Educators and Staff Act** would help create dedicated programs to offer mental health support to educators.

Beyond the challenges for the recruitment and retention of arts educators, the profession also lacks cultural diversity. A research study on arts educator demographics identified 90% of arts educators as White (non-Hispanic), compared to 82% of the total teacher workforce across all subject areas (ED, 2024). Meanwhile, the student population continues to become increasingly diverse. Due to the inherent cultural nature of the arts, it is beneficial for students to receive culturally relevant instruction. Programs such as the **Teacher Quality Partnership Program** and **Augustus F. Hawkins Centers for Excellence** help diversify the educator pipeline through the intentional recruitment of individuals from underrepresented populations by providing comprehensive professional development and incentivizing retention within their communities. Additionally, legislation, such as the **Equitable Arts Education Enhancement Act**, bolsters the capacity of arts and arts education programs by allowing for increased training, mentorship opportunities, and paid clinical experiences in order to increase the availability of diverse educators.

Baseline Experience for Students

The arts encompass a diverse set of subjects that require distinct and specialized instruction to provide students with a full range of benefits. To provide equitable access to a comprehensive arts education, instruction in the arts should be standardized, ensuring all students—regardless of location or background—receive consistent, high-quality instruction. To facilitate the standardization of arts instruction within a given subject area, the 2014 National Core Arts Standards, which will soon undergo a review process, provide a framework for outlining instructional content covered within a given grade level. The Standards have been adopted or adapted by nearly all states to provide baseline expectations for students receiving arts instruction and how the arts contribute to the holistic development

of a student across all subject areas (National Core Arts Standards, n.d.). The Standards offer a clear framework for educators in designing curricula and meeting educational goals, while allowing flexibility for educators to adapt to the needs of their students.

Additionally, the Standards offer an exceptional framework for preK–12 arts education and serve as a model for school districts across the nation. Unfortunately, insufficient funding and/or staffing within a school's arts program affects students' ability to achieve at the high levels identified in the Standards. Thus, funding from programs, such as **Title I**, could be used to bolster schools in lower income areas in offering standardized arts education, while funding for programs, such as **Title II**, could also be used to increase staff capacity and provide educators with relevant professional development.

To offer truly equitable access to the arts, our nation's public schools must be equipped to provide comprehensive arts education that is appropriate and adaptable to the needs of a diverse set of students. Our nation has been, and will continue to become, increasingly diverse. Students from a wide range of cultures, ethnicities, and backgrounds should be able to see themselves represented in the content they learn, as well as within the educators teaching them. Funding for programs, such as the **Assistance for Arts Education** program, could provide culturally enriching arts experiences by promoting partnerships between schools and local community art centers.

Beyond access to a culturally diverse arts education, students must also have access to an education that is adaptable to their individual needs and abilities. **IDEA** ensures that students with disabilities receive a free and appropriate education, which also includes equitable access to arts education. However, the impact of **IDEA** is often stifled by chronic barriers to funding. To provide a truly accessible arts education for students with disabilities, the methods of instruction, as well as all lesson plans and materials used in this instruction, must be adaptable to the specific needs of the student. Additionally, educators must also receive special instruction for administering adaptable lesson plans and creating appropriate accommodations for the needs of these students. Increased funding for programs, such as **IDEA**, and **Part D** in particular, as well as support for legislation, such as the **Reimagining Inclusive Arts Education Act**, would support local education agencies in disseminating best practices for how to work with students with special needs. In addition, these funds would allow for the purchase of adaptable materials and help cover costs associated with the training of educators working with these students.

CONCLUSION

The arts are an essential component of preK–12 education. The arts offer opportunities for creative expression, team building, inspiration, social emotional learning, self-confidence, and countless other benefits ranging from social and academic engagements to culturally enriching experiences. The 2015 passage of ESSA by Congress underscored the value of arts education by enumerating music and the arts as valid components of education and opening federal funding streams to support this instruction in public schools. Since the passage of ESSA, federal funding streams have allowed for increased access to the arts, but there are still a multitude of challenges, inequities, and barriers to this access, particularly for students in low-income and urban areas and students with disabilities. With the role of the federal government in education being to foster educational excellence and ensure equity (ED, 2025), both Congress and ED have a crucial role in addressing these issues. Increased federal assistance is critical for ensuring that students from all backgrounds have access to a comprehensive arts education. Along with this congressional funding, ED must also address chronic teacher shortages within arts education spaces to guarantee programs are adequately staffed with educators from diverse cultural backgrounds.

Impact of and Vision for Arts Education

Ensuring equitable access to arts education provides a holistic approach to nurturing student creativity, critical thinking, emotional expression, and academic success. Through the various art forms of dance, media arts, music, theatre, and visual arts, students develop an innovative mindset and refine tools that allow them to navigate their future with creativity and empathy. This inclusive approach fosters a deep appreciation for diverse perspectives and better equips students to tackle complex challenges, contribute to their communities, and pursue lifelong personal and professional growth.

Beyond the intrinsic benefits of participation in arts education, the arts also make a positive impact on student engagement and the overall school climate. A study investigating the effects of arts education on overall school climate (Bowen & Kisida, 2024) identified that students participating in arts courses show improved attendance and increased engagement in courses beyond the arts. Additionally, the study revealed an increase in the number of students taking arts courses which directly contributed to improved student and teacher perceptions as well as teacher and parent engagement (Bowen & Kisida, 2024).

The impact of the arts extends beyond what students learn in the classroom. The arts provide community, improve creativity, and most of all, empower students to express themselves in positive ways. The arts are not just a part of a well-rounded education, they are an important component of a well-rounded life and, as the Arts Education Alliance, we hope to advance policy and legislation that protects and provides equitable access to arts education for all students.

▶ **Arts education supports key social and emotional competencies.**

By centering self-awareness, self-efficacy, self-management, perseverance, social awareness, and relationship skills, arts education is associated with stronger student engagement in collaborative learning and the development of creativity, critical thinking, and communication skills (Hewitt, 2015; Laird, 2015).

▶ **Participation in the arts is associated with better attendance and behavior.**

Students who enroll in arts classes throughout high school show 32 to 51% lower rates of chronic absenteeism and are more likely to remain enrolled than peers. In addition to better attendance, students in arts programs had fewer disciplinary issues and improved on-task behavior compared with non-participating students (Morrison & McCormick, 2024).

▶ **Arts education can positively impact young people’s understanding of their identity and culture.**

It supports the development of language and motor skills, builds empathy, and is associated with improved learning in both the arts and other academic subjects (Arts Education Partnership, n.d.).

▶ **In-depth arts involvement is associated with stronger outcomes for low-income youth.**

Low-SES students with sustained arts participation earn better grades and show higher rates of college enrollment and completion than peers with limited arts exposure (Catterall, 2012).

Unified Advocacy Effort

The approach of the Arts Education Alliance to unified advocacy has been formed around three key issues: full recognition of dance, media arts, music, theatre, and visual arts as part of a “well-rounded education” under ESEA; securing funding critical to the continuance of preK–12 arts programs; and supporting federal legislation and congressional champions who aim to increase access and equity within the arts.

The Arts Education Alliance brings together organizations representing dance, media arts, music, theatre, and visual arts educators to speak with a unified voice in discussions with Congress and the U.S. Department of Education. We hope to support arts educators through our federal advocacy and our work to provide resources that enable them to offer excellent arts education in accordance with the discipline-specific Opportunity to Learn Standards. This shared advocacy agenda outlines our policy priorities and guides our continued engagement with policy makers to ensure arts education remains a priority in federal education initiatives.

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[Bill List From 119th Congress](#)