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The Arts and Education Weekend

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The Arts & Education Weekend

Richard J. Deasy

Arts and education grantmakers at an historic gathering in Santa Fe in October of 2007 agreed on the need to forge a new vision for public education in the United States and to collectively explore how the arts can help shape and realize that vision.

Convened by Grantmakers in the Arts and Grantmakers for Education, more than 100 foundation representatives met formally for the first time under the aegis of their two affinity organizations to debate and discuss the role of the arts in education.

They shared their understandings of the complex conditions and forces demanding changes in schools, including the rising levels of education and economic power of other nations, the continuing inequitable distribution of educational resources and opportunities within and across U.S. school districts and communities, and the explosive role of digital media and communications in reshaping our lives and those of the young.

In attempting to determine the value and feasibility of a collective vision for education that includes the arts, participants recognized the variations across their specific missions and purposes and also acknowledged what one called the "asymmetrical relationship" of education and arts grantmakers relative to their experiences and to the resources they commit to improving public education. But they found common ground in the awareness that even their combined resources pale in comparison to the public funding for education. How and what might they do collectively to leverage their resources and have a strategic impact on education policy and practice? And how would their arts funding contribute to that impact?

A panel chaired by Cyrus Driver (Ford Foundation) proposed as a framework for discussion of four fundamental challenges that public education must address and to which the arts can make a significant contribution.

- The changing global economy that demands an imaginative, innovative, and creative workforce equipped with skills that cut across traditional academic disciplines
- Embracing democracy and difference to advance and sustain pluralism as the foundation of society and civic life in this country

- Mastering and capitalizing on technology as a power for transforming learning and for enabling the young to give voice and visibility to their knowledge, aspirations, and achievements
- Facing up to the need for increased equity in public education: in its financing, in the quality of instruction, in the opportunities for advancement, and in the space, time, and tools to learn.

Driver's panel proposed that embracing this framework, or a comparable one, served several purposes. Such a frame would place education in the context of crucial societal concerns and would invite an investigation of the power of the arts to address these four challenges both within education and in the broader society. That is, the conversation among funders is first about a vision for how schools should respond to fundamental social concerns and then about the specific roles the arts can play. A new and generative dialogue could be prompted that would assist funders in evaluating their current efforts.

A theme that emerged in response to this proposal and in other discussions during the day was, as one attendee put it, "learning is the central focus." How do we foster learning that enables young people to deal with large social forces in their own personal development and as they become shapers of and contributors to a healthy economy and society?

One challenge is to bridge what young people learn outside school with the formalized opportunities for learning inside school so both experiences are mutually reinforcing.

In this the arts as multiple forms for accessing, representing, and communicating knowledge and meaning can play a central role, as many attendees noted. Young people, they said, are immersed in a world of music, visual representation, dance, fashion, and digital media as central forms of experience and communication. Providing instruction that fosters mastery of the art form itself and also employing the arts as modes of learning in other disciplines enlivens teaching and learning.

In exploring the value of the arts to bridge these worlds and to avoid the conclusion that only popular arts interest young people, Marshall Smith (Hewlett Foundation) took attendees to a classical music site on the Internet with performances by Pavarotti and James Brown. The most vivid display of the arts as a mode of expression and learning, however, was offered by Daniel Windham (Wallace Foundation). After an autobiographical luncheon



speech on both the value and deficiencies of school-based arts education, Windham took up his saxophone and joined Moy Eng (Hewlett Foundation) on vocals to challenge the attendees to reflect on the role of the arts, as they performed “What’s It All about Alfie?”

By exploring the arts in the context of the current challenge to engage students in meaningful and productive learning in school and out of school, attendees generally steered clear of the often paralyzing debate of whether the arts should be justified in schools for their unique values as aesthetically realized forms of personal and cultural expression or for their contributions to student success in other areas of school, life, and work. As profound and delightful forms of learning and expression, they do both.

Points of leverage

In their conversations throughout the day, attendees shared views for a new vision of education and the role of the arts and they tested out “points of leverage” for collective action that might enable them to have a greater catalytic effect on the policies, structures, and practices of public education and the allocation of public resources.

Should they focus at the level of **policy**? Several have done so recently, for instance, at the state level in California, Illinois, New Jersey, Rhode Island, and Washington and at the city level in Chicago and Oklahoma City by funding data collection processes to reveal the current gaps in providing arts education in the schools. These data have been influential in bringing about policy, legislative, and/or funding decisions supportive of arts education. Data on the status and condition of arts education in the public schools are not regularly nor comprehensively collected at the federal, state, or local level. In Dallas, however, data was collected showing that public school students were not using the educational programs of cultural organizations. This data provided the initial impetus for the current comprehensive coordination of school and community programs there that are now funded by public and private sources. The Dallas example has become a beacon to guide similar efforts in other cities.

Should strengthening such school-community **collaborations and partnerships** become a strategic focus of clusters of local funders? Over the years this has been the focus in Chicago, Cleveland, Pittsburgh, and, recently, in other

communities with national funders also involved. Attendees involved in such efforts pointed out that these efforts not only address questions of equity for students but also can generate values and attitudes in the wider community that may forge a culture of support and sustainability for the programs. In part, they also see these efforts as one way to address the vexing problem of leadership transition in school districts. Changes in leadership can be weathered if there is a strong culture of support in the community for the arts as essential to education.

Many attendees in Santa Fe pointed to the undergraduate education and continuing professional development of teachers and artists as a central concern. In small group discussions, attendees shared their strategies and grants in this area. They also addressed

the broader question of how to recruit a higher quality of undergraduates committed and prepared to teach in challenging urban settings. Here as in other conversations, attendees expressed a need to know more about the strengths and weaknesses of programs funded by colleagues, a need that many felt to be an important rationale for continuing the conversation launched in Santa Fe.

Attendees, of course, referred to the pressures on schools from state and federal accountability and testing systems as epitomized in the No Child Left Behind law. They asked each other if a commitment to developing and advocating for **new performance indicators and measures of success** should become a strategic investment on their part. Though the conversation did not often include the need for larger investments in arts education research, studies to inform and guide a measurement initiative as well as studies that continue to clarify the nature and effects of learning in the arts are greatly needed and would advance and buttress discussion of the best indicators of student development.

A related discussion posed **integrated and interdisciplinary learning** as a possible leverage point for collective action in response to the growing concern that the traditional “silo” structuring of the curriculum along discipline lines will not develop the learning and life skills deemed crucial to the evolving knowledge and skill demands of society. A specific case in point is the new focus on science, technology, engineering, and mathematics as crucial to innovation without attention to how these disciplines can and should be aligned with the content, methods, and modes of thought of the arts and humanities. An interdisciplinary approach that brings these two broad fields



together will be best suited to developing imagination, innovation, and creativity.

Who's doing what and what do we know?

At several points during the day and in a closing session facilitated by Janet Rodriquez (JPMorgan Chase), attendees were asked what knowledge and insights they might garner from colleagues that would assist them in their own work as well as in exploring future cooperation and coordination. In the broadest sense the answer was "who is doing what and what have they learned?" Or, as another group put it, "what do we know now and what don't we know?"

More specifically, their comments asked for information on strategies, promising practices, and evidence of success or failure within the "leverage point" areas mentioned above. As one attendee expressed it, there was a need for "portfolios of promising practices" that include insights on sustainability relevant to the possible areas of impact. There was also a desire for guidance on how successful strategies and practices dealt with varying local and regional educational contexts and conditions.

For instance, to leverage change in local education policy, one group asked how others find "policy brothers" within the education establishment. Another sought advice on how to involve parents more effectively in school and district advocacy for the arts. Others asked about the messages and appeals that are most effective in galvanizing public support for the arts in education. Similarly, attendees expressed a need for information from colleagues who are funding professional development, collaboratives, and integrated arts.

For many, an overarching question was whether consensus could be developed through dialogue on what constitutes quality in arts education and arts learning.

As the day drew to a close, attendees again took stock of their resources relative to the goal of achieving a new vision for education that includes the arts and again expressed the hope that they might work strategically and in cooperation with one another and with other influential forces seeking to shape education. An interesting angle on this need was offered by one attendee who said that without an awareness of other funders' values and strategies "we are in danger of unknowingly undercutting one another's efforts."

On this point, Ross Danis (Dodge Foundation), who facilitated the opening plenary of the day, reminded attendees in the closing session of the multiple reform strategies roiling the schools and also of the large interest groups that have influence in the policy debates, including, for instance, special education advocates. He urged discussions among funders on how to work in alliance with these forces to the extent possible and to examine how student engagement in arts and arts learning might fulfill the goals of these other strategies and interests.

Alison Bernstein (Ford Foundation) was invited to close the session with final advice on "where should we begin?" She urged four immediate actions:

- Continue the conversation somewhere soon so that momentum is not lost. She suggested that focusing on what is known about best practices, perhaps within one or more of the "leverage points," would ground the conversation. "Foundations," she said, "do one of two things to advance their missions: fund the development of models that provide guidance to others or work at the policy level to affect whole systems." On both fronts, she continued, there is much to learn from one another and more to be accomplished by sharing lessons learned.
- Create a "disappearing task force" to plan the next steps and convenings. The Santa Fe meeting was designed by GIA and GFE with leadership from two members of each. That group or another should be authorized to take action.
- Develop a "shared learning agenda" so that future discussions have shape, direction, and outcomes that encourage continuing collaboration.
- Create a national arts education collaborative, either under the joint aegis of GIA and GFE, by the involvement of the Arts Education Partnership, or another approach to be proposed by the task force.

Whatever the form and process, it is critical that foundations – whatever their specific missions – continue the dialogue and search to collaborate in embracing the arts as essential to learning and schooling in this new century. They should consider this search a work of art in itself – a collaboration to imagine and realize a new vision for our children's education.

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