Introduction

In 2013, the National Corporate Theatre Fund (NCTF) established, with the support of The Hearst Foundations, the Impact Creativity Innovation Program. This initiative is designed to strengthen and sustain access to high quality arts education programs in communities across the country. Through the educational programs of NCTF’s member theaters, the initiative aimed to “encourage innovation and sustainable development of theater programs with an interdisciplinary focus” such as “those theatre education programs that directly build skills and foster engagement in nontheatrical subjects.”

Design of the Impact Creativity initiative was influenced in part by the recommendations released in the 2011 report of the President’s Committee on the Arts and the Humanities, *Reinvesting in Arts Education: Winning America’s Future Through Creative Schools*. In it, the Committee called for a renewed national commitment to addressing inequities in student access to a complete and competitive education that includes the arts.

Through the development of theater programs, the Impact Creativity Innovation Program sought to address three major challenges within the broader education system: (1) inequities in student access to and participation in high quality arts education experiences; (2) the need for developing a workforce ready for the challenges of the 21st Century; and (3) constrained financial and staffing resources of schools and districts.

To address these issues, NCTF, starting in June 2013, supported the education programs of 19 theaters from across the country. Selected programs addressed one or more of the identified focus areas: (a) engaging students in STEM subjects (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics); (b) responding to social issues such as bullying, civil rights, and the experiences of underserved populations; or (c) preparing educators to use effective theater-based instructional strategies to teach other subjects.

The theater programs were implemented over a 12-month period. Overall, programs supported through the Impact Creativity Innovation Program reached upwards of 136,000 students in over 400 K-12 schools and provided professional learning opportunities to more than 450 teachers. In fulfilling the goal of service to underserved youth, the majority of schools partnering with Impact Creativity theaters for this initiative are classified as Title I schools, a U.S. Department of Education designation and federal funding initiative supporting schools with a majority population of students from low income families.

In the summer of 2014, NCTF commissioned the Arts Education Partnership (AEP), a national network of arts, business, culture, education, and philanthropic organizations dedicated to advancing arts in education for every young person in America, to analyze the results of the Impact Creativity program. AEP, a part of the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), examined the program proposals and final reports to identify themes among the programs and commonalities in challenges particularly those related to the pressing education issues of the day.
This report summarizes that analysis, exploring the ways the Impact Creativity programs are addressing these major challenges to education. The report also identifies key challenges the theaters faced in implementing the programs and offers recommendations for strengthening educational theater programs as a key strategy for student achievement and school improvement.

**Strengthening Education through Theater**

Across the country, states and local school districts are forging paths with a wide variety of partners, working together to harness innovative approaches to improve teaching and learning while responding to the diverse learning needs of a rapidly changing student population. The arts – and theatre arts in particular – are proving effective in engaging students in school and advancing college and career readiness skills. Within this context, NCTF identified three goals around primary educational issues that the Impact Creativity initiative would address:

1. **Inequities in Access**: Ensuring that all children, regardless of background, have access to a complete and competitive education that includes the arts.

2. **21st Century Workforce Development**: Developing a workforce equipped with the skills and knowledge to succeed in the jobs of the 21st Century.

3. **Constrained School Resources**: Serving as a partner with schools in providing arts education opportunities for students and professional learning opportunities for educators, all at little or no cost to the schools.

Through partnerships that both bring theater educators into school classrooms and students and teachers into the theaters, the educational programs of the 19 participating theaters in the Impact Creativity initiative, are making strides towards achieving these goals.

**Inequities in Access**

Every year, millions of students across the country do not have access to an education that includes the arts. This is especially true for students from underserved communities such as families with low socio-economic status, students of color, students with disabilities, and English language learners.

Impact Creativity, through its participating theaters, is working to supplement, strengthen, and extend the arts learning opportunity for students in their communities through their education programs designed for underserved sectors, including Title I schools, students with disabilities, and incarcerated youth.

- **Title I** – As noted earlier, many of the theaters participating in Impact Creativity targeted Title I schools serving students from low income families. For many of these students, the only arts education they might experience would be through community organizations such as the NCTF theaters.

The Impact Creativity programs working with these students, such as the Guthrie Theater’s Schools on Stage (SOS) program, provided a valuable bridge between learning in the classroom with that of the theater by sending teams of teaching artists or theater educators into the schools prior
to a full immersion experience of workshops and performances at the theaters.

- **Students with Disabilities** – Students with disabilities represent another underserved population for arts education access. The arts can have important therapeutic benefits for many children and adults living with disabilities and yet some arts venues, such as theaters, can be intimidating for these students and their families.

  To address this barrier, two theaters created sensory-friendly performances that, among other things, removed loud or sudden noises and movements to create a more supportive and engaging environment for children on the autism spectrum. The Old Globe, one of these theaters, created a guide, “Going to The Old Globe”, to help families learn what to expect during the theater experience before arriving to see *Dr. Seuss’ How the Grinch Stole Christmas!*

  The other, Trinity Repertory Company, continues to work with students beyond the performances through in-school and out-of-school theatre classes, meeting with the teachers and school administrators to ensure that the theater provides complementary and inclusive supports associated with goals in an Individualized Education Program (IEP) for special education students.

- **Incarcerated Youth** – Youth in detention centers are often an overlooked population whose educational opportunities and access to the benefits of arts learning diminish greatly when placed within these facilities. And yet, for many youth in this environment, the arts can serve as a cathartic and rehabilitative aspect in shaping their development and interest in the arts as a future vocation.

  The Manhattan Theatre Club, for example, has taken its successful Write on the Edge (WrOTE) program to a nearby detention facility where detained youth are able to explore the playwriting process and find a voice for constructively expressing themselves.

### Developing a 21st Century Workforce

Beyond the subjects of mathematics and English Language Arts, mounting evidence indicates that to succeed in school, work, and life, students need much more. School and business leaders alike maintain that their future students and workers will need a broad range of essential skills and traits such as persistence, critical thinking, problem solving, motivation, and creativity.

The Impact Creativity theatre education programs lay a strong foundation for future students by aligning their lessons to rigorous standards in the arts and other disciplines, helping students learn how to express themselves, and giving students the skills to work collaboratively.

- **Standards** – Across the country, schools are experiencing a comprehensive shift towards higher learning expectations. Any organization interested in working or partnering with schools are likely seeing the effects of this shift through new standards, accountability systems, and teacher evaluations.

  Several theaters noted the importance of understanding academic standards both in the arts and in other disciplines as a strategy for successful partnerships with schools. For example, the Cleveland Play House has aligned its arts integration education programming to the Common Core State Standards to ensure that the content is relevant to what the students are learning in their classes during the school day.

- **Communication** – A primary skill for the 21st Century is the ability to communicate. Theatre is a natural tool for cultivating this skill and, as such, many of the Impact Creativity programs are helping students learn how to express their thoughts, ideas, and concerns through words and performance as essential elements.

  One theater, Actors Theatre of Louisville, does this by encouraging students to choose a subject of importance to them (such as child abuse or teen
stress), research that topic, and develop plays or tableaus to express their thoughts on it.

- **Collaboration** – Another important 21st Century skill is collaboration. The ability to work with diverse groups of individuals to overcome disagreement and adversity prepares students to apply this skill in all aspects of their lives and careers. The performing arts, particularly theatre, are fruitful training grounds for fostering growth in this area.

  For instance, Arena Stage’s Voices of Now program brings together ensembles of students to create and perform autobiographical theatre pieces about the young artists’ lives. Over the course of a year, these ensembles meet to collaborate on the process, challenge one another, and learn how to work together toward a common goal.

**Constrained School Resources**

Several years after the start of the most recent recession, schools and districts are still suffering from significant limitations to their resources. Each year, news stories of school hiring freezes, teacher layoffs, and programs cuts are commonplace in many communities. When these situations occur, however, the role of community organizations becomes even more vital. The Impact Creativity education programs have identified several paths for addressing this issue:

- **Low-cost programs** – When budgets get tight, programs and experiences for students, particularly those not tied to standardized tests, are often reduced or eliminated, especially within Title I schools. To address these concerns, most of the Impact Creativity programs are available to partner schools, students, and teachers at either no or very low cost.

  Some theaters, like Walnut Street Theatre, require a nominal fee for their programs but will make every effort to accommodate schools unable to cover those costs. During this program year, Walnut Street Theatre covered the reduced costs of over $7,000 so they could reach as many schools as possible.

- **Bringing the theater to the school** – Although bringing students to the theater to experience the wonder of live performances is still a key aspect of many theater education programs, the transportation and programmatic costs of these field trips have become barriers for some schools. Theaters, such as the Cleveland Play House’s Classroom Matinee Touring Program, have developed visiting theatrical ensembles that take the theater to the school and consist of both performance and educational workshops.

- **Professional learning** – Professional learning opportunities are critical in helping educators continue to grow their set of teaching tools and expand their ability to help their students succeed. For educators teaching subjects outside of the arts, drama-based professional learning opportunities provide the participating teachers with the ability to use theatre to engage and teach in unique and creative ways.

  For instance, the Goodman Theatre provides teachers with a series of workshops designed to show how all aspects of the theater can be used to teach important lessons in other subjects such as the STEM subjects. One lesson, for example, illuminated the concepts of physics through the fly system used to make Scrooge fly in A Christmas Carol.

**Challenges to Theater-based Education**

Over the course of the year, the Impact Creativity programs achieved great success by engaging thousands of students in learning in and through theatre. The theaters did, however, identify several challenges faced while implementing their programs. These challenges can be characterized in three ways: (1) internal organizational challenges, (2) school-based challenges, and (3) participation and engagement challenges.
Internal organizational challenges

Even with careful planning and strong organizational commitment, theaters can experience internal organizational challenges in implementing educational programs. Two related issues identified by the Impact Creativity theaters are funding and staffing.

- **Funding** – As with many nonprofit organizations, funding poses a primary challenge to program offerings. Although often a major focus of a theater’s work, education programs, as one theater noted, rarely generate revenue for the theaters. Instead, they must be subsidized by either the revenue-generating work of these organizations or through additional fundraising. This is particularly true for the Impact Creativity programs which provide programs at low or no cost to partner schools and participating students.

- **Staffing** – Relatedly, even the most popular and successful programs can be limited by the availability of staff time. Without adding new funds for staff, the theaters are only able to expand programming to a certain point. And even when funding is available, theaters face the challenge of their staff’s own professional development to ensure growth in content knowledge within and beyond their theatre discipline.

For example, the Goodman Theatre focused on STEM integration and noted that, although the programs were staffed by well-trained and highly knowledgeable theater educators, the staff did not always have the in-house STEM content knowledge to authentically incorporate drama into the STEM disciplines. To address this, the Goodman found another partner organization that had the STEM content expertise to assist in the program while also finding professional learning opportunities for staff to build upon this expertise.

School-based challenges

Impact Creativity was developed to supplement and strengthen the theatre education opportunities available to students. For most of these programs, this entailed partnering with schools which can involve a different set of challenges. The two most prominently identified by the theaters were school funding and curricular priorities.

- **School funding** – Similar to the challenges faced by the theaters, schools are also facing severe budget constraints. Several theaters noted these constraints as a distinct barrier to building partnerships with these schools. When funding is constrained, schools are limited in their ability to expend funds for programs outside of the school and, as noted above, theaters are not always able to cover or subsidize those additional costs.

The Guthrie Theater, for example, found that some of its partner schools could not cover the transportation costs of bringing students to the theater and so found an individual donor who was willing to cover some of those costs.

- **Priorities** – In the ever-changing accountability landscape of public education, the teachers and school administrators have to make important, and often hard decisions on curricular priorities. Several theaters noted challenges in convincing the relevant decision makers that the theatre programs can serve as an important aid in addressing their curricular priorities.
Several theaters have overcome this obstacle by beginning to tie their programs directly to important education issues such as the Common Core State Standards to show that their programs can strengthen the outcomes that school leaders value. 

**Participation and Engagement Challenges**

Even with funding and strong school partners, getting and keeping participants engaged and involved in the programs can be difficult for many theaters. Three particular challenges noted by theaters for participation and engagement were: transient populations, overcoming misconceptions, and diversifying participant pools.

- **Transient population** – Manhattan Theatre Club has transferred their successful theater education program to a local detention center. However, those held in the center are not permanently placed there and are transferred or released with regularity. This means that building the long-term outcomes of the original multi-visit program is difficult. To address this, the theater has had to adapt the program by condensing the timeline and creating multiple entry points into each set of lessons so as to better fit the needs and realities of its population.

- **Overcoming misconceptions** – For some, particularly those who have never been in a theater or for those with disabilities, approaching a theater can be met with apprehension. As an example, The Old Globe’s strategy for families with children on the autism spectrum included specific outreach to acclimate families prior to a theater visit and customized communications to convey that the theater is a safe and sensory-friendly place for children.

- **Diversifying participant pools** – One of the major goals of each of these programs, whether focused on student education or educator professional learning, is to continue growing the number and diversity of those participating in them. Seattle Repertory Theatre’s teacher program, for example, has been very successful in engaging elementary school teachers. However, they have struggled to interest teachers from middle and high schools as teachers from those schools make up only 25% (15% and 10%, respectively) of the program participants. The theater’s staff continues to work to engage more middle and high school teachers for future years.

**Conclusions**

Impact Creativity has, over the year of the initiative, made significant strides in ensuring equitable access to high quality arts experiences for many underserved youth in communities represented by their 19 participating theaters. The programs offered by the member theaters have, in many diverse ways, addressed three clearly defined education issues established as guideposts for NCTF’s vision for this initiative:

1. ensuring equitable access to theater education for all students including students from low-income families, students with disabilities, and incarcerated youth;

2. preparing students with the ability to communicate, collaborate, and implement the skills and knowledge necessary to succeed in the 21st century workforce; and
3. overcoming school resource constraints by offering low or no cost educational opportunities for students and professional learning opportunities for educators.

In a 2013 commentary on the *Huffington Post*, NCTF Executive Director Bruce Whitacre made the following observation about a recent conversation he had with a potential donor: “We needed to...define theater education and its impact in more tangible ways, so that we can have a national conversation about something that currently differs from state to state, and theatre to theatre.”

Below are several recommendations for NCTF, the theaters participating in Impact Creativity, and the theater-field across the country to consider as they work towards this larger goal:

- **Strengthen program evaluation.** Program evaluation allows theaters to identify the impact that their programs are having on the populations served. Much like programs in community organizations all around the country, a great deal of the program evaluation for the Impact Creativity programs was focused on estimating the satisfaction of participants and teachers. By articulating desired educational outcomes and tying the program evaluation measures (via surveys or other assessment measures), the resulting data can be used to strengthen programs more effectively and to articulate program impact.

- **Identify what matters to decision makers.** Decision makers often grapple with competing priorities and limited resources as they strive to fulfill the many demands in their communities. So, what makes them choose one option over another? Often, they choose options best serving the needs of their constituents and those delivering a valuable return on investment. Much like many of the Impact Creativity theaters have been doing with the Common Core State Standards, the theatre community should continue to identify the priorities and concerns of their local schools and communicate the role that theater programs can have in addressing those issues.

- **Utilize or create a community of practice.** The education programs implemented by the Impact Creativity theaters over the year of this initiative demonstrated creative solutions to many imposed barriers as well as innovative approaches to sparking and measuring student engagement. One theater is piloting an online assessment of audience engagement, another has a Web portal for sharing theatre-integrated lesson plans, and one theater has developed resources to minimize the apprehension of coming to the theater for youth with special needs.

By utilizing an existing (or developing a new) community of practice that allows for sharing of program innovations like these, theater educators can build on the experiences of their colleagues as well as explore potential collaborations to avoid having each theater “reinvent the wheel” in isolation.

Looking ahead, the theatre field is ripe to continue supplementing, strengthening, and enriching the education opportunities of America’s youth. Continuing and expanding the programs contained here, developing strong program evaluation tied to the desired educational outcomes, creating a way to share experiences across organizations, will all serve to help overcome the many challenges identified above.

As the number of theaters and other community arts organizations partnering with schools continues to grow, progress will be made, step by step, toward a time when every child has a complete and competitive education that includes the arts.
Theater Programs Participating in Impact Creativity

**Actors Theatre of Louisville (Louisville, KY)**
Living Newspaper is an in-classroom playwriting residency program that focuses on media literacy, human rights issues, and the notion that playwriting can be a useful tool to inform others about an issue.

**Alley Theatre (Houston, TX)**
Playwriting 360° (P360) is a residency program that introduces students to dramatic writing as a creative outlet and directs them in creating their own ten-minute plays.

**Alliance Theatre (Atlanta, GA)**
The Collision Project explores the most current and divisive issues through thought-provoking theatre created by teens, for teens, and about teens.

**Arena Stage (Washington, DC)**
Voices of Now is a two-semester after-school program in which participants learn about theater, writing, and performance, with the ultimate goal of devising and performing a piece of theater based on their own writing.

**American Conservatory Theater (San Francisco, CA)**
The ACTsmart Intensive Residency program aims to help the most at-risk population of San Francisco’s public high school students through free, year-long theater training.

**American Repertory Theater (Cambridge, MA)**
The new Education Experience and Community Connections program provides high-quality arts enrichment services to 4,313 mostly low-income community members, including more than 3,600 youth from throughout Greater Boston.

**Center Theatre Group (Los Angeles, CA)**
The August Wilson In-School Residencies provide a theatre-infused, standards-based study of works that offer a rich resource for literature, history, and social studies. The program also encourages students to explore the African-American perspective during socially-significant periods of modern history.

**Cleveland Play House (Cleveland, OH)**
The Classroom Matinee Touring Program takes theatre into the schools for Pre-K through 3rd grade students and combines performances, teacher support, and arts integrated classroom workshops.

**Dallas Theater Center (Dallas, TX)**
Project Discovery, serving Title I high schools across North Texas, prepares teachers and students to engage in the social justice issues that emerge from our productions through specialty training sessions, partnerships with other organizations, and workshops.

**Denver Center Theatre Company (Denver, CO)**
Dramatic Learning is an innovative and interactive teaching method that applies principles of dramatic arts to basic classroom curriculum for over 10,000 students. Dramatic Learning incorporates theatre education in STEM subjects, addresses social and civil rights issues, actively works with at-risk youth, and trains educators.
Theater Programs Participating in Impact Creativity (cont.)

Goodman Theatre (Chicago, IL)
The Student Subscription Series (SSS) program integrates STEM content into its programming and addresses major academic achievement gaps by significantly underserved students.

Guthrie Theater (Minneapolis, MN)
The Schools on Stage (SOS) residency develops the creative voice, capacity for collaboration, and analytical skills of high school students through the power of theater through both the written word and performance.

Hartford Stage (Hartford, CT)
Transform brings together 24 high school students from urban and suburban districts to create and perform a devised piece of theatre that explores the idea of the transformation of minds, neighborhoods, and communities.

Long Wharf Theatre (New Haven, CT)
Ed Lab is a program that gives teachers training in arts-based techniques which help students develop creative, higher order thinking skills that result in achieving academic success.

Manhattan Theatre Club (New York, NY)
WrOTE II is a writing program for incarcerated high school youth that focuses on building literacy and personal skills in expressing emotions and developing critical thinking and communication skills.

The Old Globe (San Diego, CA)
An autism-friendly performance model takes on The Old Globe’s classic, How the Grinch Stole Christmas!

Seattle Repertory Theatre (Seattle, WA)
Bringing Theatre into the Classroom and The Teaching Artists Training Lab are programs that provide professional development opportunities to school teachers and teaching artists, respectively.

Trinity Repertory Company (Providence, RI)
The Trinity Rep Active Imagination Network (TRAIN) program serves students on the autism spectrum as well as children with other development disorders; TRAIN also offers an autism-friendly public performance of A Christmas Carol.

Walnut Street Theatre (Philadelphia, PA)
Performances of educational plays address social issues such as diversity, civil rights, multiculturalism, self-esteem, bullying, and nutrition for students grades K-12.
About the Arts Education Partnership (AEP)

The Arts Education Partnership, a part of the Council of Chief State School Officers, is a national network of organizations dedicated to advancing the arts in education through research, policy, and practice. Established in 1995 through a unique interagency agreement between the National Endowment for the Arts and the U.S. Department of Education, AEP aspires to ensure that every student in America succeeds in school, work, and life as a result of a high quality education in and through the arts. For more information, visit AEP at www.aep-arts.org.

References
1 T. Rosen (personal communication to NCTF member theaters, November 18, 2012).


5 To learn more about what research says about the outcomes of arts (including theatre) education, please visit http://www.artsedsearch.org/.
