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Arts Education Access: Some children left behind

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Abstract

Arts education remains to be cut from school programs despite the research done to prove the correlation between the arts and academic success across various fields. Through robust research done by the Department of Education, the National Endowment for the Arts, and EdVestors, there is ample evidence that the arts are not only important, but that they are necessary, particularly for students from underserved populations.

Looking at the current and past laws surrounding American public education, there is much to be learned. Specifically, the No Child Left Behind Act implemented a wave of standardized testing. Many schools are still left with the effects of No Child Left Behind, giving the most importance to tests such as the MCASTs (for Massachusetts). Although the intentions behind some of these laws and regulations such as Common Core Standards, there seems to still be a gap. Focusing particularly on Boston Public Schools, there has been progress through programs such as the Arts Expansion. There is still work to be done, but we are at the start.

Keywords: art, arts education, public education

Introduction

The field of arts education has been extremely limited in both its study and existence. Looking specifically at American public education, the laws and regulations for education overall are very limited Federally. Dobbs (1989) explains how much of the schools' curriculum is based on individual state laws. For example, in Massachusetts, there are very specific laws that are put in place regarding Special Education and Educator Licensure, but these laws are different from those in another state, say Texas (doe.mass.edu, 2018). Furthermore, there are some states go more specifically broken down so that school boards represent counties or even individual cities.

Because of these disparities in education, there has been more recent action on the federal level to try to combat this issue. The implementation of No Child Left Behind in 2002 was supposed to help level the playing field amongst students no matter their background. However, many cities believe that in reality this standardization of education has done more harm than good (Education Week, 2008). Presently, in the face of budget cuts, arts education programming remains the first to go. Despite public opinion on arts education, in legislation and implementation it remains on the back-burner. With organizations such as the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) purportedly bolstering arts education, there has been little change or improvement since the 1970s (Kraehe & Acuff, 2013).

No Child Left Behind

To get a better understanding of the No Child Left Behind Act, it is important to look at how "we" got there in the first place. Prior to 1965, there were no specific laws put in place regarding the federal role of education (Klein, 2015). To help define clear roles for the federal government's involvement in education, then-President Lyndon B. Johnson implemented the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) in 1965, setting aside \$1 billion in funding

under Title I as part of the “Great Society Program” (Klein 2015). After the ESEA was passed in 1965, there were a few reiterations that were passed to reflect societal changes, but overall no major changes were made. Fast forward to George W. Bush’s presidency, and suddenly it becomes very apparent that there are major disparities in the quality of education. Just three days after swearing in as President, Bush passed what came to be recognized as the cornerstone of his presidency (Department of Education, 2002).

On paper, the No Child Left Behind Act seemed like a shining solution to a increasingly concerning problem. Some of the promises claimed in the act include: increased accountability of certified teachers, more options for students who attend low-scoring schools, more flexibility for state laws, emphasis on literacy, and drastic changes to English as a Second Language (ESL) education (Department of Education, 2002). The major focus of the No Child Left Behind Act were students from minority groups, special education, and ESL students. From the executive summary from the Department of Education (2002), there was particular concern for students that were from low-income and urban school settings, who were reported to have low-scoring schools.

The implementation of No Child Left Behind led to a drastic increase in standardized testing, which continues even today. Essentially, schools were expected to immediately start testing and implementing all of these new strategies to become “the best.” Every level of the school was being tested under No Child Left Behind. Students were expected to perform on tests, but additionally there was increased pressure on teachers to properly prepare their students for these tests. Because of this, the way that teachers had to teach drastically changed because rather than teaching for knowledge, they had to start teaching to test.

Additionally, these pressures on schools to perform were so high that all schools were expected to reach proficiency level by the 2013-2014 academic year. However, what “proficiency” exactly meant was up to each individual state, thanks to the aforementioned

increased state flexibility (Department of Education, 2002). Because of this, there were still major challenges that schools faced, but now with more pressure from testing. Additionally, schools had to participate in Academic Yearly Progress (AYP) reports to track this progress. Failure to show a proper percentage of progress meant more cuts for the school. With all of these changes, there was supposedly going to be an increase in available funding to \$25 billion, but it never got to that point (Klein, 2015). Essentially, schools were being told that they needed to make all of these changes, yet they were never given the funds to properly implement these changes. Because of this, schools that were already lacking continued to struggle in order to keep up with the federal mandates.

Around this time is when schools start needing to reconsider various aspects of school life in order to make their budgets work. In the face of standardized testing, the arts became the first choice to be cut for many schools (McDonald, 2016). Because the arts are not capable of being tested in a standardized way, it became less important than the testable subjects of math, science, and reading. So, when cuts had to be made, many schools were left with no choice but to cut their arts programs. Following these difficult decisions made by school boards, there were still issues with education that were left unsolved by No Child Left Behind.

By President Obama's second term, he presented a repeal of No Child Left Behind, introducing the Every Student Succeeds Act in 2015 (Klein, 2015). This act allowed for waivers to be made so that schools could find alternative means if they were considered "low-achieving" in order to reach the previously mandated proficiency level. Because this was put into place within the last 60 days of the Obama presidency, Trump was able to amend certain aspects within his first few weeks of presidency, overturning the leniency on states to avoid being held accountable (Department of Education, 2017). With all of these variations in education law (at least on the federal level), there seems to be a start in solving these issues in a more permanent way (Center for Education Reform, 2019).

Current Research

Historically, art and arts education has been referred to as coursework reserved for the elite (Mulcahy 1989). Because of this, the arts have remained a subject that people from underserved backgrounds remain reluctant to pursue (Department of Education, 2015). Keeping in mind the various societal barriers that underserved students already have to experience, having a lack of access to the arts can be very detrimental to their overall “success” in life (Zakaras & Lowell, 2008). Kraehe & Acuff (2013) present a critical look at how underserved communities are often left out of the discussion and research in the field. They state that typically, the terminology “underserved” applies to urban or inner-city populations/schools that have predominantly minority students. The issues regarding socially constructed demographic labels such as sexual orientation, race, gender, socioeconomic status, and religion are not adequately supported in the current state of arts education.

One particular aspect of critique of modern education that nearly every article included was of the current marker of academic success: standardized testing (Eisner, 1997, Bequette & Bequette, 2012, Gregory, 2017, Kraehe & Acuff, 2013, Mulcahy, 1989, Dobbs, 1989, Gregory, 2017). Institutional pressures on teachers and students to perform based on test scores have created a learning environment that is not conducive to arts education having a place in American classrooms. The arts’ inability to be tested or even taught in a standardized way make them a poor fit into the current definition of academic achievement, hence making them easier to cut when necessary. Eisner (1997) states, “What we regard as an educational problem is a function of what we choose to test, how we choose to construct tests, and how we interpret their results” (p. 63). Since “testing” for the arts is far more subjective and perceived as judgmental, it has not been seen as a way to express the academic deficit that many students have in the arts.

Along with the notion of test-heavy schooling, the sciences and math (in addition to the other STEM subjects like technology and engineering) have come to the forefront of American education (Bequette & Bequette, 2012). However, critics of the current state of education such as Gregory (2017) argue that particularly visual art has a place in this discussion as well. The importance of design in subjects such as engineering has led to a new adaptation of STEM known as STEAM (science, technology, engineering, art, and math). While this terminology is gaining popularity, it still leaves out the plethora of other subjects under the umbrella of “the arts” such as music, theatre, and dance.

Where public education has fallen short, it has been all-but-entirely replaced by out-of-school programs and extracurriculars (Zakaras & Lowell, 2008). In this sense, an air of performability (as shown in marching bands, choral competitions, etc.) has been added to the arts in a school setting, simultaneously increasing the air of elitism. In this way, students in underserved communities have yet another level of limited access. One of the biggest problems underscored in many of the articles looked at was the lack of artistic training for elementary teachers (Zakaras & Lowell, 2008, Gregory, 2017, Dobbs, 1989, Bequette & Bequette, 2012). During this formative stage, students would greatly benefit from learning through the arts, yet it is typically left to a small “craft” that is usually holiday-oriented, adding to the mentality of art as a frivolous activity rather than something to be studied and taken seriously.

When the NEA first expressed concerns in the American education system in 1998, they brought up points that could still apply today, stating, “because of the pressures on the school day, a comprehensive and sequential arts education is inaccessible except to a very few and often only to those with talent or a special interest” (Zakaras & Lowell, p.30, 2008). With the arts having this regard of being a niche subject rather than a means of expression accessible by all students, underserved students continued to be at a disadvantage. To express the benefits

of arts education to underserved students, the NEA took charge in creating data to show the benefits of exposure to the arts in these communities.

Principal Study

One of the key studies showing the importance of arts education was done by the NEA (Latterall, et al., 2012). This longitudinal study was done over the course of nearly 20 years. The first group looked at was from 1988-1998, then 1997-2007, then 2002-2006, and lastly 1999-2009. Within each of these groups, there was a particular focus on two sub-groups: a group of low socioeconomic background (SES) students who were not exposed to the arts and then a group of low SES students had high exposure. Across an array of circumstances such as graduation rate, job level, salary, student involvement, and civic engagement, the low SES students who had a high exposure to the arts did significantly better than the low SES students who had limited exposure (Latterall, et al., p.12-16, 2012). These students that had high arts exposure and low SES also did better than the general pool of students looked at that were not low SES in most of these categories [see Appendix A]. This study is important in showcasing the effect that involvement in the arts is crucial when other privileges are not present. Furthermore, for low SES students or other underserved students, classroom exposure to the arts may be the only place where they can explore/enjoy these subjects in their day-to-day.

Case Study: Boston Public Schools

Out of the 129 schools listed on the BPS website, 84 are strictly public elementary schools. There are many different categories for BPS schools: exam schools, pilot (code word: urban) schools, Horace Mann charter schools, turnaround schools, innovation schools, and alternative programs. Of these 84 elementary schools, 59 are traditional, 16 are innovation/pilot, three are Horace Mann Charter Schools, and six are early education centers. One of the particular distinctions, the innovation school, places great emphasis on creativity and design. One of the former innovation schools, Blackstone Elementary (located in the South

End) recently lost its innovation status, losing \$500,000 in program funding. Because of this decision made by the school board, the students that once had robust programming are now in the midst of a crisis. Fortunately, this is the only school that appears to be having this problem.

To help fill the gaps in arts education, a plethora of organizations have been created. Two very important organizations are MASSCreative and EdVestors. MASSCreative promotes arts advocacy and actively works with the MA Cultural Council to help promote the arts and public art access with state legislators (mass-creative.org). Additionally, EdVestors creates data for arts education in Boston and helps to match organizations with schools that have a need (edvestors.org). For example, Art Resource Collaborative for Kids (ARCK) has been able to partner with schools utilizing the platform and resources that EdVestors has made available. ARCK was initially created to help support Josiah Quincy elementary school. In 2012, founder and Executive Director Sara Mraish Demeter founded ARCK because she found out that her son would not have an art class. Their mission, to “empower students to become innovators and creative thinkers by integrating art design with literacy and STEM education” (ARCK, 2019) showcases the ability that art has to transform thinking in a creative way. With ARCK, teaching artists go into classrooms at Josiah Quincy, Blackstone, and Gardner Pilot Academy, using art to explain STEM subjects, rather than just teaching a typical art class. In this practical way, students both learn hard and soft skills and are able to express themselves in a way that is not possible except through the arts.

BPS Arts Expansion

In 2016, EdVestors, released a study that looked at the effects of the BPS Arts Expansion initiative. Starting in 2008, the former superintendent of BPS looked at the state of arts education in BPS schools and decided that major changes needed to be made. In 2009, BPS Arts Expansion was implemented for all grade levels in BPS. The results are dazzling. Prior to the Arts Expansion, only 65% of elementary students had an art class once a week. As

of 2016, 98% of students had a once-a-week class (bpsarts.org). The numbers are lower for twice a week classes, but there was still improvement [see Appendix B]. Rather than strictly relying on a higher education budget, BPS proved the benefits of forming private-public partnerships. Where the education system was falling short, these outside organizations were able to help fill the gaps, and now the case of BPS is being used as an example of arts revitalization is possible (edvestors.org).

Luckily, Boston has proven that the woes for arts education both have a solution and that this solution is sustainable, with the Arts Expansion now running on 10 years of implementation. Each year, they are getting closer to reaching the mark of 100% access and use (edvestors.org). While these improvements are commendable, there are still some points to keep in mind. Firstly, reliance on outside organizations may not always be a sustainable option. Nonprofits run on the support from donors and grants. With changes in the economy, nonprofits may face hits in times of distress. Having near total-reliance on these outside organization doesn't leave much room for the possibility that these organizations might have years where they lose money. Additionally, another point to keep in mind is that through the Arts Expansion, the budget for schools has also increased [see Appendix C]. It goes without saying that more money will equal more access. Taking these points with a grain of salt, it is still incredible to see the progress that BPS has made within a relatively short amount of time.

Classroom Implications

Art is one of the few vehicles able to surpass all language; everyone can participate in some way. In ESL classrooms, inclusion in the arts could be very beneficial in the support of classrooms that utilize Universal Design for Learning (UDL) practices. UDL is a practice that takes accessibility into great consideration (National Disability Authority, 2012). Initially, Universal Design was used with architecture, the idea being that buildings should be made to already be compliant with policies in place by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).

Universal Design was especially accepted with the current need to make older buildings more accessible (Department of Labor). The premise for the implementation of Universal Design was the idea that it is far easier to design a building to already be accessible upon completion than needing to go back in after a building has already been constructed to add access points such as wheelchair ramps (TEAL Center, 2010). As the TEAL Center (2010) states, Universal Design practices are important because buildings constructed in this way end being beneficial in functionality for everyone that uses the building, not just those with disabilities. When it comes to UDL, the same principles are taken into consideration, designing lessons so that they are accessible and able to be taught to and understood by all students in the class, regardless of ability. Rather than the typical form of planning a lesson for “normal” students and having a portion set aside for the students with different needs, with UDL, the lessons are planned specifically so that *all* students’ needs will be met. Much like the benefits of UD buildings, the benefits of lessons structured under UDL are inclusive of students both with and without academic needs such as English as a Second Language (ESL) students, students with special needs and behavioral challenges.

The arts present a near-perfect platform to showcase UDL to students in current American classrooms despite the budget cuts. Currently, in most classrooms ESL students often become separated from their English-proficient peers in what is called Sheltered English Immersion, creating a level of social ostracization (McGee, 2012). At the very least, arts classes could be an opportunity for the students in the out-group to connect with their peers. This would be beneficial exposure for both groups of students; those that are usually separated will feel the community with the larger group, and those that are part of the in-group will learn empathy and will be able to have conversations rather than staying separate. All hate-based behavior is learned, and having exposure to groups that are different than you leads to less ignorance,

xenophobia, discrimination, etc. Additionally, this exposure would help remove any ideas of “otherness” either of themselves or of their peers.

Suffolk Student Survey

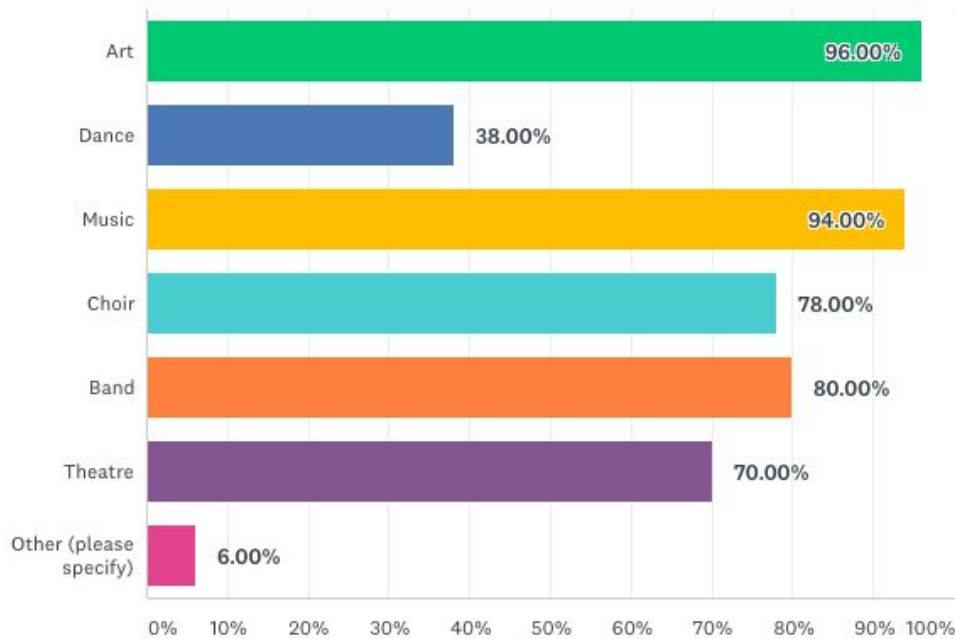
To get a better, more personal understanding of the effects that this inequitable access to arts education can have in institutions of higher education, such as private universities, students at Suffolk University were surveyed to take a look at their own experiences with arts education during their primary years. The survey was sent out utilizing email and social media postings on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. The questions in the survey covered basic demographic information [see Appendix D]. Additionally, the survey looks at the types of arts education classes that students were offered in elementary school as well as which classes they participated in. Finally, students were asked if these classes that they participated in were mandatory or not. 50 students provided answers. While this is a limited group study, there are some trends that are of note.

52% of students provided responses of attending elementary school in Massachusetts, which is not surprising given the location of Suffolk. 62% of people surveyed identify as white/caucasian, and an overwhelming 80% identified as women. This is also pretty reflective of trends in college attendance, with white women being one of the higher groups represented (McFarland, et al., 2018). 76% of students responded to having attended public school, which is interesting to see at a private university. However, this again reflects current trends in secondary education. McFarland, et al., 2018 report that between 2000-2016, there was a 27% increase in attendance to private, non-profit colleges and universities (like Suffolk) compared to only a 10% increase in public institutions.

Looking at the classes offered to students in elementary school, the two most commonly offered subjects were art (visual art) at 96% and music at 94% [see Figure 1]. Following behind are, in order: band, choir, theatre, dance, and other, which included photography. These

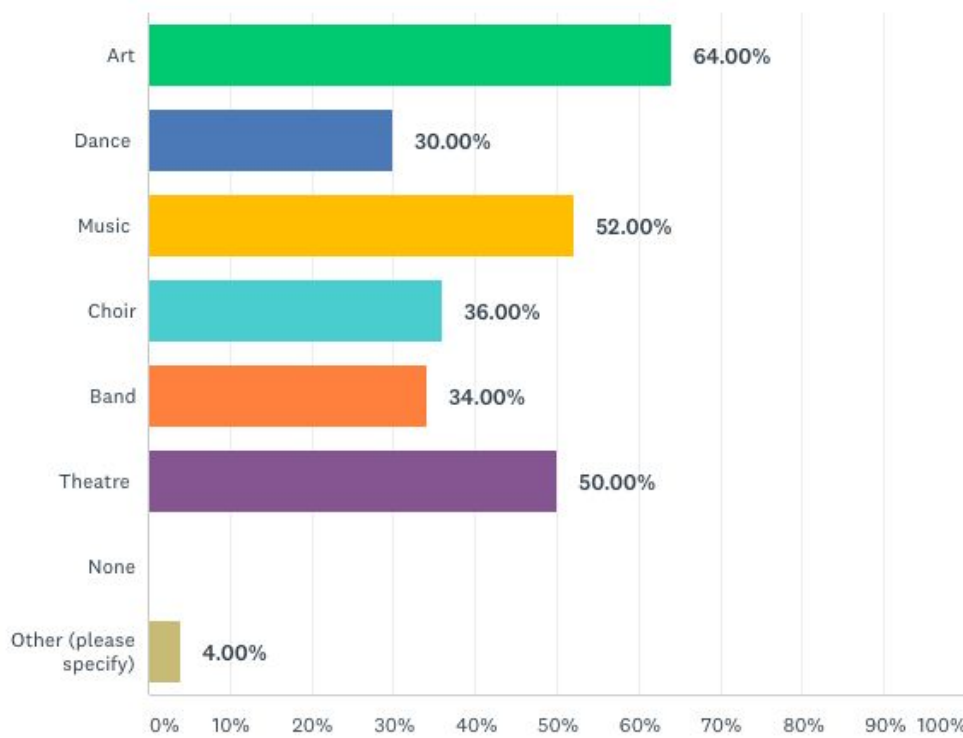
responses were reflective of the pre-conceived ideas around the arts. Particularly the fact that art and music were the two most commonly offered subjects. It is also interesting to note that there was not one subject that all schools offered, showing the differences that students can have school to school.

Figure 1



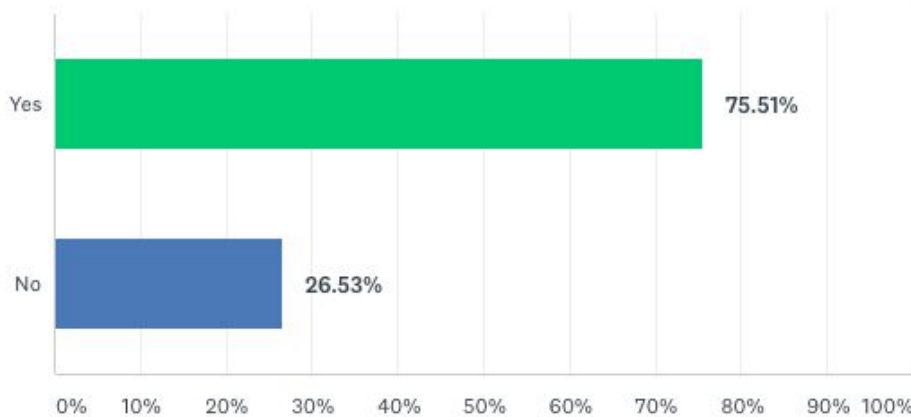
Interestingly, the data shifts when asked which subjects students actually participated in. Art is still at the top of the leaderboard, but goes down to 64% participation. Music goes down to 52%, and so on down to 30% for dance [see Figure 2]. Now that the survey has concluded, it would be interesting to look more deeply into why this drop occurred. The trends in the data suggest that maybe students had to choose just one subject to fulfill an arts requirement. While schools might have offered a plethora of options, students may have had to choose just one rather than being able to take a variety of classes. Another point of interest from that data from this question is the participation in theatre. Theatre had the smallest gap in participation. It is interesting that this was true at the elementary level, considering how many times theatre is not included in elementary education (Parsad & Spiegelman, 2011).

Figure 2



The last question asked was if these classes were mandatory as part of the curriculum. Interestingly, 26% of students said that they were not mandatory [see Figure 3]. While it is great that three quarters of students had mandatory arts classes, it still shows that there was a gap within the past 15 years. In the future, it would be interesting to see if the schools where students responded no have changed their curriculums to have a required arts course.

Figure 3

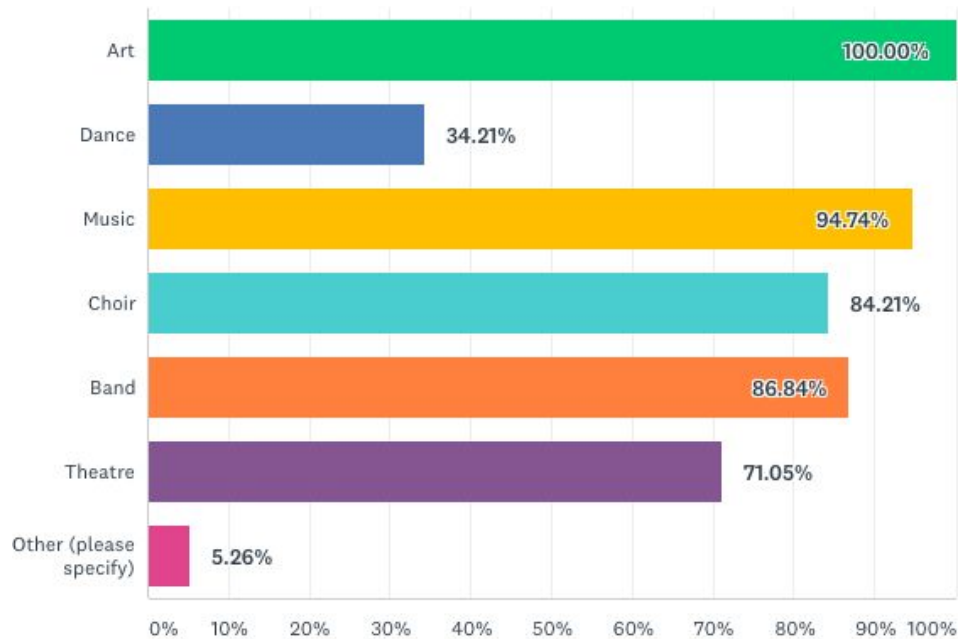


The implications of this survey prove how fragmented our education system remains, yet it is not as dire as was anticipated. With little to no response from students that were in the out-group (i.e. not white), there can be no major claims with the relation that this has to underserved students. As this survey was of college students, we are able to take a peek into the implications that elementary education can have on higher education as well. If students continue to have this inequitable exposure to the arts in an academic setting, there can be larger scale imbalances in their respective futures.

Results

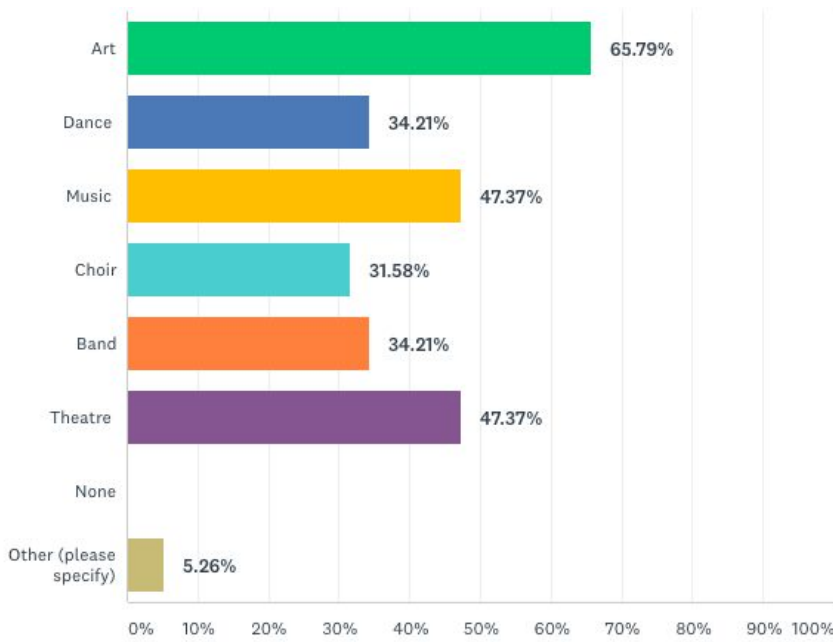
Looking at the responses to questions 7-9 regarding classes offered, it is also important to note the data from students that reported having attended public school. Overall, the responses were fairly similar to the overall response, but there were a few notable differences. Starting off with the courses offered, all students reported having art as a possible class [see Figure 4]. Overall, responses were higher for public school students (aside from dance). It is very interesting to see that art is the subject that all students had access to.

Figure 4



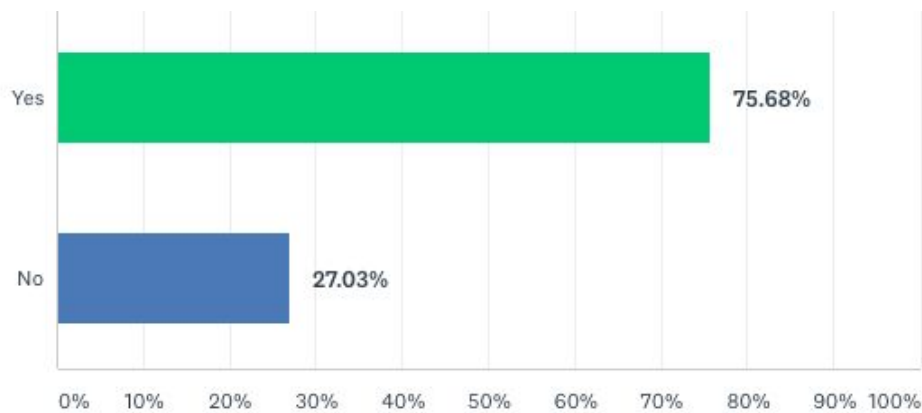
Despite the increase in courses offered, the public school students reported similar gaps to the overall response [see Figure 5]. These responses showed larger gaps than the overall response, which is shocking in comparison to the fact that in the last question there was overall a greater variety in courses being offered. Again, there is the possibility that students had to choose which class to take rather than being able to explore all of the options.

Figure 5



The data from the final question is essentially the same as the overall response [see Figure 6], showing again that there at the very least *was* some disparity amongst students.

Figure 6



Impact on the Workplace

Especially in our modern age of technology, now more than ever the arts are intrinsically important to our everyday lives. Design is behind nearly everything we consume and observe on a daily basis. We can throw our modern way of life out the window if we continue to not expose our children to the encompassing powers of the arts. Having the ability to utilize and understand various means of media expression is pivotal for people to develop and understand their identities and paths in life. If the possibility of the arts being cut was viewed as unconstitutional, then perhaps there would be a change, but that is not the case.

Between the buildings we live, work, and play in, the cities we navigate through (or over or under), music that we listen to, TV shows or movies that we binge-watch, museums and events we enjoy, an artist has been behind every single one of these things. From the clothes we wear, to what we put in our homes and in our bodies, an artist is always a part of the team, no matter the business. If the arts were viewed as design or creativity than maybe politicians would have a greater appreciation for what they provide for both students and the workforce. Without creativity and the arts, we have no culture. If it weren't for the arts, we would have no idea about the ancient histories of civilizations such as the Mesopotamians or the Egyptian rulers. Ancient hieroglyphics are one of the oldest forms of art that we are still able to witness today. Access to the arts will directly correlate to how our current history will be preserved for future generations. In light of the recent fire at the Notre Dame de Paris, millions of people worldwide expressed their feelings of solace and despair upon seeing centuries of art and history burning away. The importance that art and visual histories have in our societies and to the larger world is something that can not be taken for granted.

When looking at the feats in technology that have been accomplished in the past 50 years, none of these advancements would have been possible without the assistance of their design teams. Given the American desire to always be the best or be on top and have

cutting-edge products and quality of life, it is surprising that we are still focused on modes of education that have been in place since the mid 20th century. The lack of progress in public American classrooms is detrimental to our progress, the effects of which might only become noticed when it's too late. Aside from the academic and social achievements and skills that benefit students, there are many soft skills that are able to more fluidly be explored through the arts. During this politically turbulent time, students nearing pubescence deserve to be able to explore their identities and passions through the welcoming and accepting vehicle of the arts.

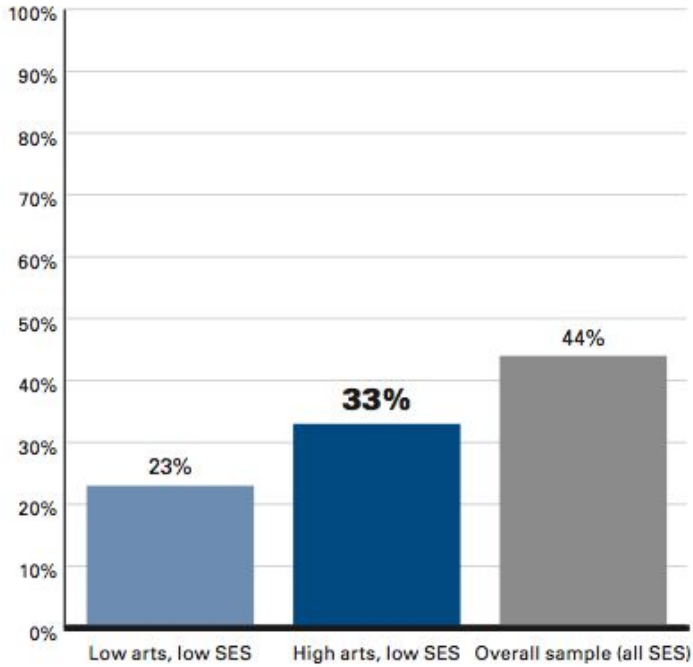
Conclusions and Future Research Recommendations

One of the problems facing the study of arts education is the lack of robust research. There is much that has been left un-studied, perhaps due to the nature of the acceptance of the arts as a school subject rather than a frivolous hobby. In terms of statistics, other than studies done by the NEA and limited private foundations such as the Getty Center (Kraehe & Acuff, 2013), there is little existing quantitative evidence on arts education. While the studies that have been done show that there are nothing but benefits, there is still a lack of actual implementation of arts education education programs in public schools. No where in the research has a conclusion been made that the arts are detrimental to the education of our youth. There are not countless articles citing reasons for the arts to continue to be cut, yet they remain to be of fairly limited access. Much of the research done have provided simplistic remedies of how to fill the gaps, but there is still more to be researched.

Kraehe & Acuff (2013), mention how in the current existing research, many underserved populations are left out of the data. Rather than having the supporting evidence to keep the arts in underserved communities, they remain in both limited access and limited study. This limited study could potential be a part in why it continues to be cut in certain geographic areas. Additionally, it is inspiring to see cases such as the Boston Public School where progress is being made. No change will truly be lasting until more schools continue to stand up for the arts.

Appendix A

Percent of 10th Graders Who Went on to Complete a High School Calculus Course (2004)



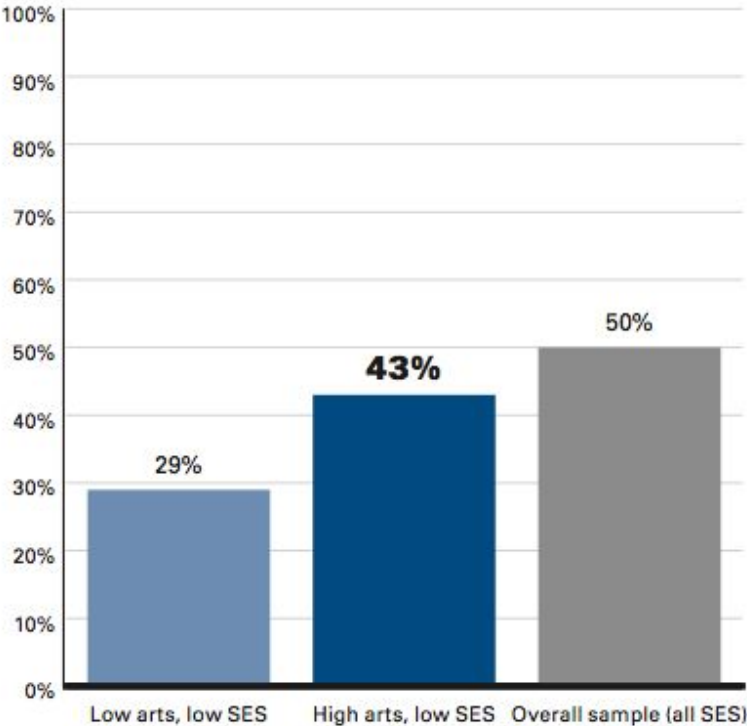
Source: ELS: 2002. From 2002, when participants were in 10th grade, to 2004, when most participants had completed 12th grade.

	Low arts	High arts
Ever attended college after high school	48%	71%
Ever attended a four-year college	17%	39%
If they attended college:		
Earned as highest degree:		
Associate's degree	10%	24%
Bachelor's degree	6%	18%
Graduate or professional degree	0%	1%
Earned mostly A's in college	9%	15%

Note: Differences shown in bold are statistically significant.

Source: NELS:88. From 1988, when participants were in the 8th grade, to 2000, when most had turned 26.

Percent of Young Adults Who Voted in a Local Election (2006)



Source: ELS:2002. From 2002, when participants were in 10th grade, to 2006, when most participants had turned 20.

Appendix B

% PreK-8 students receiving weekly arts



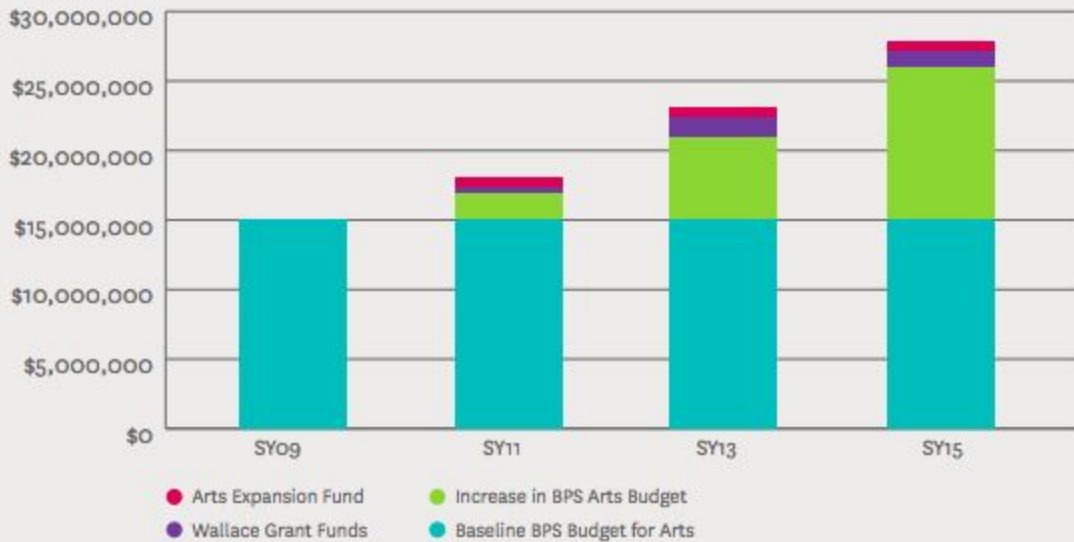
% PreK-8 students receiving twice weekly arts



Appendix C

	SY 09	SY 11	SY 15
Percentage Weekly Year Long Arts Instruction Grades K-8	67%	81%	93%
Percentage Any Arts Instruction High School Students	26%	47%	67%
Number of Arts Specialist FTEs	156.6	166.7	280
District Total Investment (approx)	\$15M	\$17M	\$26M

BPS-AE Public and Private Funding



Appendix D

1. Please provide your Suffolk email

2. What grade are you in?

- Freshman
- Sophomore
- Junior
- Senior
- Fifth year / Other

3. Where did you attend Elementary School (K-8)?

City/Town

State/Province

Country

4. Which race/ethnicity best describes you? (Please choose only one.)

- Native American or Alaskan Native
- Asian / Pacific Islander
- Black or African American
- Latinx
- White / Caucasian
- Multiple ethnicity / Other (please specify)

5. What is your gender identity?

- Woman
- Man
- Genderqueer or non-binary
- Agender
- Not specified above, please specify

6. What type of school did you attend?

- Public
- Private (non-religious)
- Private (religious)
- Homeschool
- Other (please specify)

7. Select which types of programs your school provided

- Art
- Dance
- Music
- Other (please specify)
- Choir
- Band
- Theatre

8. Which types of programs did you participate in?

- Art
- Band
- Dance
- Theatre
- Music
- None
- Choir
- Other (please specify)

9. Were any of these mandatory as classes?

- Yes
- No

Yes (please specify)

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