

National Association of State Boards of Education

⊕ Focusing on Gaps in Access to Arts Education

By Valerie Norville

Many K-12 students lack access to arts courses and experiences. Students in high-poverty schools, schools with large minority populations, and rural schools tend to have the least access to high-quality education in music, fine arts, theatre, and dance.¹ Some schools offer no arts courses at all, and many state policymakers likely do not know where the gaps are.

The gaps are important. Participation in school-based arts has been linked to students' better academic outcomes, graduation rates, community engagement, engagement in school, and postsecondary success.² Arts education is also a means by which students acquire critical thinking skills.³

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) named instruction in the arts as an essential component of a well-rounded education and offered several avenues by which states could enhance students' ability to participate in arts education. But a key step for state policymakers is learning what the data say about where arts are taught and where they are not. State boards of education can help by encouraging their states to collect and report statewide data on students' access to arts education, as California and New Jersey have done.

To address the gaps that those data reveal, state boards can go further, opting to add arts participation and access measures in state accountability systems, as Kentucky and Illinois have. States may choose to

require courses in visual and performing arts as part of their high school graduation requirements, as Kentucky and New Jersey have.⁴ State boards can also support collaborations with local art organizations and urge districts and schools with the largest concentrations of low-income students to embed the arts in school improvement strategies.

IDENTIFYING GAPS

To suss out gaps in arts access, eight states have been actively working with Quadrant Research on making arts education data widely available, and more are considering such projects. Users can scan the data dashboards to see which schools and districts are offering courses in each of the arts disciplines that a state requires schools to offer and how many students are participating. New Jersey, California, and Wisconsin have launched websites already, according to Quadrant CEO Bob Morrison. "The overriding theory of change is, to get to where you want to go, you have to know where you are," he said.

New Jersey was the first state to develop a web-based dashboard on arts courses and participation, which built on efforts in 2006 to survey schools on arts access and participation and then to publicly report data. State arts advocates and the state's education agency collaborated on the project, with buy-in from the state board of education.

In a state that requires students to have access to all four arts disciplines, the data project revealed that about 65 percent of New Jersey students were participating in at least one course in the arts and 75,000 students had no access to any arts courses.

"The state board was stunned and absolutely furious that what it had said needed to be provided was not," Morrison said.

A decade later, nearly all students in the state have access to arts instruction, and participation has risen to 80 percent.⁵ He credits communications efforts for much of the progress, saying that some superintendents were simply unaware of state-level expectations or needed information about the benefits of arts access.

Still, less than a quarter of the state's high schools currently offer courses in all four disciplines, and less than 5 percent of elementary and middle schools do.⁶ Past president of the New Jersey State Board of Education Mark Biedron cited remaining challenges in finding time in the school day and resources for the arts. "We've got work to do," he said.

New Jersey also includes visual and performing arts participation data on its school performance reports. During 2016–17, all middle school students and half of its high school students took at least one arts course, according to the latest report.

California's dashboard was developed more recently and now includes data from 2014–17.⁷ California was part of the first cohort of states participating in the National Arts Education Data Project, launched by the State Education Agency Directors of Arts Education and Quadrant.⁸ To create and host the dashboard, state arts coalition Create CA worked with the state's education agency, which culled information from the state longitudinal data system.

A survey of a decade ago showed that 37 percent of high-poverty schools in California failed to provide any standards-based arts study, and 89 percent of schools failed to offer courses in the four disciplines, as is required in California state code.⁹

“A lot of our challenges were in remote rural areas of the state,” said Jack Mitchell, arts consultant to the California Department of Education, and part of the challenge was finding qualified teachers. “But some rural counties were comparatively arts rich.” Thus a major value of the dashboard was its ability to distinguish remote schools and districts that were providing arts courses from those that were not in order to set up fruitful information sharing across districts.

Mitchell said the next step will be to pair schools where high percentages of students receive free and reduced price meals and also have high levels of access and participation to similar schools that lack such access.

District officials, county arts organizations, and parent teacher organizations are using the data and seeking training from Create CA on how to use it, Mitchell said. The data’s ready visibility has prompted local conversa-

tions about how to include arts funding into district spending plans.

In April, the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) and the Education Commission of the States convened a working group of arts specialists and data managers from across the country to get a sense of where all 50 states and the District of Columbia stand in their data collection, reporting, and transparency around arts education. During the course of a two-year project, they will be providing technical assistance, resources, and tools to help all states advance equitable access in arts education, according to Ayanna Hudson, NEA’s director of arts education.

ACCOUNTABILITY

Eleven states have plans to include arts measures in their state accountability plans, submitted last year as part of ESSA. Nineteen states mention arts education in relation to Student Support and Academic Enrichment Grants, a program under Title IV, Part A (see map). The grants are designed to give Title I schools added funds for providing a well-rounded education that includes arts, as well as promoting safe and healthy schools and supporting technology use in schools.¹⁰

New Jersey opted to mention the arts under Title IV but did not include indicators on arts access or participation as part of its accountability system. According to Mark Biedron, past president of the New Jersey State Board of Education, not too much should be read into the decision not to include the arts as an extra indicator of school quality and success under ESSA. That decision largely reflects state officials’ desire to avoid tying New Jersey’s priorities for its education system to a federal requirement, in his view.

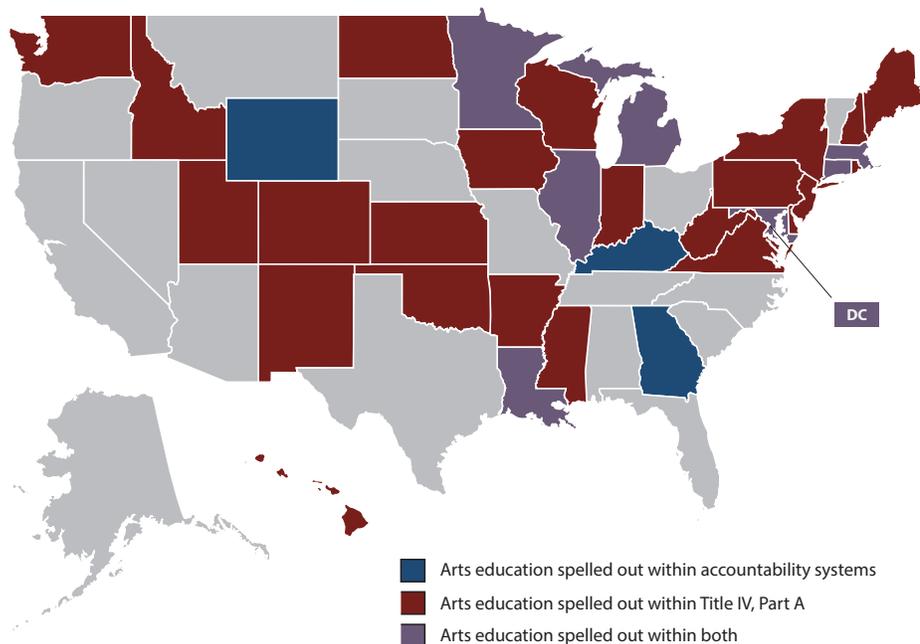
Even where arts measures are absent in ESSA plans, the arts can play a role in helping schools with accountability targets, suggests Morrison. For example, New Jersey includes a measure of chronic absenteeism, and students who are engaged in arts programs and courses in school are more likely to attend all classes regularly, he said.

Biedron, a longtime proponent of the arts, said he believes that arts education is essential for building the soft skills the workplace demands, such as problem solving, creativity, and teamwork, and that a focus on testing math and English language arts has detracted from building those skills. He also urged New Jersey to revisit its Quality Single Accountability Continuum, the system for evaluating district performance, to ensure that the system encompasses arts education.

Kentucky was already using measures of arts instruction to assess school quality before ESSA’s passage, buoyed by support from the state’s education commissioner, the board of education, and stakeholder groups.¹¹ It did so through school-based program reviews that included ratings and audits. That accountability process ended last year. The Kentucky Department of Education is instead developing a school profile report, as required by a 2017 state law, that schools will use to describe how they have addressed the state-mandated standards in the visual and performing arts.

Visual and performing arts are also part of an opportunity and access measure of school quality in its ESSA plan. The measure is meant to assess the extent to which all Kentucky students have access to a rich curriculum that includes the arts as well as career exploration in middle school and high school, essential skills,

States Spell Out Arts Education in ESSA Plans



Source: Drawn from table in Lynn Tuttle, “How Does Arts Education Fare in the Final Round of State ESSA Plan Submissions?” (Denver: Education Commission of the States, April 2018).

gifted and talented services, and advanced coursework.

This emphasis on including the arts in accountability reflects the input of stakeholders across the state who emphasized the importance of a well-rounded education, relayed concerns about the achievement gap between student groups, and expressed a desire to have the accountability system reflect a broader definition of school quality. According to the state's plan, "The theory of action is that Kentucky will see the gap between student group performances decrease if all students and student groups are held to the same high expectations, are in attendance, and receive rich learning experiences."

For Dr. Kyle Lee, academic standards coordinator at the Kentucky Department of Education's Office of Teaching and Learning, it is more than theory. "I am that Title I kid," he said. Growing up in a rural Kentucky community with a single parent, he needed a teacher to help him channel his gift as a percussionist into arts experiences, a scholarship, and eventually a doctoral degree. "And it all happened because I had that one quality arts opportunity."

Ratings under the opportunities and access measure, as with other indicators in the accountability system, are based on points assigned for each area included in the indicator, with the most points awarded for schools and districts that come closest to offering instruction for a substantial part of the school year to all its students. When the system goes into effect, each indicator will receive a rating of one to five stars, with the highest performing schools receiving a five-star rating. The state's board still has decisions to make on how the measure will be implemented in the coming school year, added Lee.

"We don't want to just measure access," he said. "We want to determine that it's a quality opportunity."

Kentucky's plan also references its intention to use Title IV, Part B funds to support community learning centers that provide academic, artistic, and cultural enrichment opportunities for children.

Partnerships with local arts organizations figure prominently in Kentucky's plans to

bring arts opportunities to its students. "We're blessed with such rich culture, especially in rural areas," Lee said. The Kentucky Arts Council makes a teaching artists' directory available so that schools that cannot hire a full complement of teachers in the arts can locate, for example, a woodworker or dulcimer player to instruct students. The education department trains the working artists so their instruction aligns with student learning standards.

Through the Kentucky Center for the Arts, the state offers summer arts academies to teachers and school leaders. This summer, for example, they are gathering school counselors, arts teachers, and administrators to begin a process for developing tools and strategies for using arts experiences to increase students' mental health and well-being.

Illinois included fine arts as part of its ESSA plan, including in its accountability system. In comments on the plan's drafts, hundreds of students and several Illinois arts organizations urged that arts be included as an indicator of school quality.

The Illinois state board balanced comments on the importance of the arts with those seeking to ensure a nonpunitive system of accountability. The final plan includes an indicator that considers the percentage of students enrolled in a fine arts course during the school year.

State data revealed that more than 40 Illinois high schools lacked any courses in the fine arts or had no student participation in the arts. Thus the education department and the board opted to initially give zero weight to the arts indicator to avoid penalizing schools that lack the means to offer arts under the state's current funding formula. The board promised to add weight to the indicator in the 2021–22 school year after a public comment period.

"We had a great conversation about how important an art experience is," said Tony Smith, Illinois state superintendent of education. "However, in the course of the time we had, we couldn't land on, is it just having an experience of art, is it [participation] in an art class, having a portfolio, is it you've been to a symphony? What exactly 'it' is is still to be determined. We put a very clear placeholder in, and real work is under way."¹²

STATE BOARD OPPORTUNITIES

Many state board members across the country have decried the narrowing of the curriculum that occurred in many of their schools when student achievement in math and English language arts were overriding concerns. They welcome an emphasis on a richer curriculum and a more holistic picture of school quality. Yet they may be unaware of the extent to which arts courses are and are not available in their state.

State boards can begin by looking at available data and asking state arts directors and data managers where their state stands in making the data publicly available. "Dig in," New Jersey's Biedron suggests. "Speak with your commissioner, talk to superintendents. Report back to the state board."

State boards can also engage in a broader review of how fine arts fit in to state efforts to offer students a well-rounded education. Are arts mentioned in state ESSA plans? Are they specifically mentioned in relation to state's aspirations to provide a well-rounded education? Are these aspirations reflected in high school graduation requirements? Are data on arts participation and access available via school report cards or other public reporting? Do they figure into a state's accountability systems?

"The biggest takeaway for us is that arts is not a class," said Kentucky's Lee. "We have to look for cross-curricular connections. Breaking down the barriers [between content areas] makes all our programs stronger."

Regardless of how states support equitable access to arts education, it will be important to stress that making arts data available is not an exercise in calling out schools for failing to provide arts courses but rather a means for identifying which ones need more support and information. "An important piece is being sure you have resources in place" for strengthening arts programs, said California's Mitchell.

Valerie Norville is NASBE's editorial director.

NOTES

1 See, e.g., Northeast Louisiana Arts Council, “The State of Arts Education in Rural Northeast Louisiana” (West Monroe, LA, 2018); Nick Rabkin and E.C. Hedberg, “Arts Education in America: What the Declines Mean for Arts Participation” (Washington, DC: National Endowment for the Arts, 2011); Basmat Parsad et al., “Arts Education in Public Elementary and Secondary Schools: 1999–2000 and 2009–10,” NCES 2012–014 (Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics, 2012). For a summary of state-level data collection studies, see Yael Silk et al., “The State Status Report: A Review of State and Regional Arts Education Studies” (Washington, DC: Americans for the Arts, 2015).

2 See, e.g., Ken Elpus, “Arts Education and Positive Youth Development: Cognitive, Behavioral, and Social Outcomes of Adolescents Who Study the Arts” (Washington, DC: National Endowment for the Arts, 2013); James S. Catterall, *Doing Well and Doing Good by Doing Art: The Effects of Education in the Visual and Performing Arts on the Achievements and Values of Young Adults* (Los Angeles/London: Imagination Group/I-Group Books, 2009).

3 Daniel H. Bowen et al., “Learning to Think Critically: A Visual Art Experiment,” *Educational Researcher* 43, no. 1 (2014): 37–44; Marianna Adams et al., “Thinking Through Art: Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum School Partnership Program Year 3 Research Results” (Portland, OR: Institute for Learning Innovation, 2007).

4 California requires a credit in which students choose either a credit in visual and performing arts or a world language, and Illinois requires a year-long course in arts, music, world language, or vocational education.

5 Interview with Bob Morrison, April 19, 2018.

6 “ArtsED Now. Every Child, Every School: The 2017 New Jersey Arts Education Census Summary Report” (Warren, NJ: ArtsEd NJ, 2017).

7 See Create CA, Interactive Dashboard, <http://www.createca.dreamhosters.com/interactive-dashboard/>.

8 Also part of the first cohort of states participating in the project, Wisconsin recently launched its arts education dashboard. North Carolina, Arizona, and New York are seeking SEA review of their dashboards before release, and Ohio, Tennessee, and New Jersey are on track for an early summer release of their own arts data dashboards.

9 K.R. Woodworth et al., “An Unfinished Canvas: Arts Education in California: Taking Stock of Policies and Practices” (Menlo Park, CA: SRI International, 2007).

10 Lynn Tuttle, “How Does Arts Education Fare in the Final Round of State ESSA Plan Submissions?” blog (Denver: Education Commission of the States, January 18, 2018).

11 A 2012 survey by nonprofit SouthArts found that Kentucky schools, particularly at the elementary level, provided access to arts classes that generally exceeded regional and national averages. Elementary enrollment in theater and dance classes exceeded the regional average; Allen Bell, “Arts Education in the South Phase I: Public School Data and Principals’ Perspectives” (Atlanta: SouthArts, 2014).

12 NASBE, “Reviewing State ESSA Plans: Inside Board Decisions,” webinar (May 9, 2017).