



**Gigi Antoni**

Director of Learning & Enrichment,  
The Wallace Foundation

# The NASBE Interview

*For 21 years, **Gigi Antoni** led Big Thought in Dallas, a nonprofit focused on overcoming the opportunity gap for children in poverty. For her work in expanding access to arts learning, in 2011 she was named by President Barack Obama a Champion of Change for Arts Education. Since 2017, she has been director of learning and enrichment at The Wallace Foundation.*



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## What unique value does arts education bring to children's K-12 experience?

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The evidence is clear that high-quality arts education delivers a variety of benefits. In 2004, the RAND Corporation reviewed the evidence in a report titled “Gifts of the Muse: Reframing the Debate About the Benefits of the Arts” that was commissioned by The Wallace Foundation. The study found that arts education, especially when delivered over time, can help students acquire proficiency in an art form; expose them to new perspectives; positively affect attitudes and behaviors such as self-discipline, self-efficacy, and improved school attendance that are precursors to academic achievement; instill prosocial attitudes and behaviors (such as developing social bonds, working with mentors); help them learn how to learn; and foster skills like critical thinking. Put another way, high-quality arts education builds not only skills in the arts but helps develop other capabilities that are useful, even essential, in school and life.

Two later studies bear out these findings. For example, a 2018 report by the American Institutes for Research and also commissioned by Wallace, “Review of Evidence: Arts Education through the Lens of ESSA,” found evidence for benefits in arts learning, academics, social-emotional learning including self-efficacy, and process abilities like critical thinking and creativity. The effects were moderate and statistically significant, and, remarkably, larger than three quarters of the 70 interventions reviewed by the federal What Works Clearinghouse. And a 2017 report, “Review of Evidence: Arts Integration through the Lens of the Every Student Succeeds Act” and also by the American Institutes for Research, found effects from arts integration in arts learning, academic achievement, attitudes toward school, critical thinking, and social-emotional learning. The effects, modest and statistically significant, understandably varied by the nature of the program.

Based on my own experience, I have also found that out-of-schooltime arts programs are a place where kids learn to reflect and to give peer feedback. Arts instructors are often the first educators with whom students have an opportunity to build long-term relationships over multiple years. They can serve as anchoring relationships both in schools and in community programs.

Another benefit is laying the groundwork for a lifetime of rewarding arts experiences. Research shows that lifelong involvement in the arts is powerfully influenced by early exposure. Apart from commercial entertainment, like movies and television, that usually happens through community programming and arts education. When children are engaged in the arts at a young age, they are more likely to stay engaged as adults.

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This long-term involvement in the arts in turn can, as “Gifts of the Muse” suggests, lead to broader societal benefits. In addition to the more obvious benefits, like a healthier arts sector, it can lead to greater social cohesion. Children who grow up with a broader exposure to other perspectives may be in a better position to find common ground with others from different backgrounds.

## **What are the obstacles to equitable access to arts education? What state policies can help remove these obstacles?**

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The main obstacles are funding, staffing, and curriculum priorities. There may be standards at a state level, but they are not necessarily funded or tracked. As a result, districts are not always incentivized to meet even minimum standards. State leaders can work to make sure that policies are not only established but also funded. Leaders can also ensure that there are policies and funding for both in-school—that is, guidance on how federal funding like Title 1 can be used—and out-of-school arts programming—ensuring that 21st century funding, for example, links community organizations with schools.

It is important that arts education classes and programs be staffed appropriately with qualified instructors who receive ongoing professional development. Policies to support and ensure high-quality staffing include state standards for arts certification in every art form, mandates for schools to hire highly qualified (meaning certified) instructors, and incentives for mixed professional development programming that encourages certified arts instructors in schools to open their training to community arts instructors to develop common language and encourage pathway planning that links in and out-of-school arts programming.

Arts learning is not always an instructional or time priority at both the state and local level. For true equity, it should be a part of every child’s day. This can happen by building out the school day by providing afterschool and summer enrichment opportunities. That can be hard to do equitably, which is why a successful strategy should include a combination of opportunities, including in school, afterschool, and summer

in the classroom and in the neighborhoods. To develop mastery in the arts, children need access to sustained and sequential arts learning opportunities. In- and out-of-school arts instructors can collectively design arts pathways with classes that build upon on another—introduction to painting, painting 101, painting 201. Thus, while having state policy for minimum standards is incredibly important, it is equally important for state policies to cast a vision of arts learning that leads to mastery for students who will make arts their occupation as well as those who will master an art form as a hobby that brings a lifetime of joy and fulfillment.

## **Tell us about your experience in building support for improving children’s access to arts programs in a community setting. What lessons have you learned?**

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In 1997, when I was CEO of Big Thought in Dallas, the mayor asked the local arts commission to review the city’s cultural policy as part of a strategic planning effort. Big Thought took part in the study that was commissioned. The results were alarming.

- While some children regularly accessed the city’s cultural resources and received multiple arts learning experiences, 75 percent—the most economically depressed—received little to none.
- Although there were a number of providers available, there was no one agency overseeing them, so delivery and communication was disjointed and inconsistent.
- There was no way to measure the quality of impact of the experiences being provided.

Based on the results of the study, the City of Dallas asked the cultural community to develop a way to use public money so all Dallas children received access to the city’s cultural assets as part of their arts education. The result was ArtsPartners, a public-private partnership between Big Thought, Dallas Independent School District, and the City of Dallas Office of Cultural Affairs.

The partners convened and coordinated a system of more than 150 arts and cultural providers who aligned their educational

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programs with core curriculum subjects at each grade level for every elementary school student in Dallas ISD. Our goals were to increase access and equity and improve the quality of teaching and learning in the arts. The most significant outcome of ArtsPartners was its near immediate impact on teaching and learning in the arts.

In 2005, The Wallace Foundation designed an initiative to develop, strengthen, and document effective, sustainable positive changes within selected cities that have already demonstrated a strong commitment to improving arts education within and outside the schools. Wallace designated Dallas as one of two such cities and selected Big Thought as the local partner to bring together a strategic coalition that included the City of Dallas, Dallas ISD, and the broader cultural community. The partnership discussed how long-term interventions and sustained funding could develop and strengthen existing arts learning for all children regardless of where they live or what schools they attend.

The partners determined that the solution was to change the environment, not to tackle individual programs. They convened a broad coalition of influencers (including school board and city council members, arts commissioners, business and funding communities), implementers (superintendent, mayor, library system, parks and recreation, parents), and instructors (including fine arts specialists, general classroom teachers, individual artists, cultural providers).

The partners held community conversations with almost 200 educators, philanthropists, and cultural and district leaders to hear from the community what was needed and what already existed. They discovered some emerging themes, like empowerment (of parents, organizations), equity (in the city of Dallas, especially for enrichment programs), communication (among groups and in communities). One theme really emerged as central: the importance of neighborhood coordination. So the partnership looked at other organizations who were doing the same thing, and as it turned out, there were quite a few successful ones. What was needed was communication and coordination.

We learned several things from this experience:

- Collective action with aligned efforts, public-private partnership, and the use of data are

critical in developing policies that ensure that children have equitable access to arts education.

- Collaboration and neighborhood-based educational and enrichment activities are also critical to improving equity.
- Parent engagement is key, and the home is often the most important venue for early arts learning. Students and parents identified family members, including siblings, and neighbors as cultural role models (and early teachers). Parents described a wide range of other creative activities that are valued and meaningful to children and families, beyond traditional arts disciplines.
- In school, afterschool, and out-of-school arts learning programs do not have to be discrete activities that require separate planning and design. Rather, sustained, developmentally appropriate opportunities for children often depend on effective pathways among in-school, afterschool, and out-of-school programs.

Our experiences, and those of several other cities, were captured in a 2008 RAND study commissioned by Wallace, “Revitalizing Arts Education through Community-Wide Coordination.” Though it cautioned that efforts at coordination are vulnerable to policy shifts, RAND concluded that the cities and counties that were coordinating to improve access appeared to be making headway.

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### **What are the roles for schools and after-school programs, and how can they complement each other? How can state leaders encourage productive collaborations?**

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Many years ago, it was believed that if all children had access to the arts in school, they would benefit the same way that their low-need counterparts did. Today, it's apparent that there also need to be opportunities after school—where kids live—to extend and enrich what they receive during school.

Arts education doesn't only happen in K-12 classrooms. It happens across multiple environments and includes youth development agencies,

churches, parks and recreation departments, libraries, and other community organizations. To provide equitable access to arts learning opportunities for children, we need to build pathways across formal and informal environments in which arts education for children takes place and facilitate the establishment of policies that mandate provision of arts learning in schools. All this work can be supported by data.

In Dallas, Big Thought researched where arts education was happening across the city and surveyed 6,000 children about what they wanted to learn in the arts. The research yielded some surprising discoveries. For example, although a few high schools had dance programs, most dance instruction was happening in churches and at parks and rec centers. So Big Thought let families know where to find a rich supply of community dance classes but then they also connected the community resources back to the schools. This way the school and community dance instructors could learn from and appreciate each other. Big Thought also found that the instrument kids most wanted to learn to play was the guitar. So they put a guitar program into the public schools and also placed a guitar program in a neighborhood cultural center. These kinds of pathways not only encouraged kids to extend their arts education, they also made it possible by providing services where children learn and live.

The Dallas community also had to put policies in place that provided a minimum standard of arts education. After ArtsPartners presented the school district with data and research and raised funds to support the effort, the Dallas Independent School District or ISD mandated that every elementary school student receive 90 minutes of arts instruction per week. But it was clear that wasn't enough to build access. They had to link informal community arts education with school instruction. They did that by building intergovernmental relationships that resulted in policies between the school district and the city. They linked departments like parks and recreation and the Office of Cultural Affairs with the school district. To truly move the needle on equitable access, the Dallas community had to build a connected, cohesive system of arts learning for children across the city.

## What can school and district leaders do to ensure that all children get a quality arts education? What can state leaders do?

State leaders have the opportunity and challenge of setting a vision for how local municipalities can share and leverage their cultural resources for all children in the state. State leaders also have access to state public money as well as private philanthropy that is motivated by a state or regional effort. In large urban centers like Dallas, city leaders often thoughtfully use data and feedback from constituents to ensure that cultural resources are being equitably shared among all the city's children.

This is the opportunity and challenge for state leaders—to imagine a future where children in rural areas or even suburban areas have access to resources that may be geographically centered in cities. This can be done through a variety of methods: offering state funding to cultural institutions to partner with school districts to develop distance learning and/or traveling program opportunities; directing technology funding to school districts to ensure they have the ability to stream live performances and master classes from cultural institutions that are already providing distance learning; and thinking broadly about all the state programs that have an art component—public art programs, state parks' landscaping programs—and considering how an arts education component that includes state youth can be added.

In 2009, Wallace published “The Qualities of Quality: Understanding Excellence in Arts Education,” a report by Harvard's Project Zero. A key finding was that defining quality is an essential first step. In other words, arts educators need to come together to build a collective definition of what quality arts education means. State leaders can invite certified arts instructors, professional and community artists, and arts educators to build a statewide vision for quality arts education that includes introductory arts activities as well as arts pathways that lead to mastery. A statewide vision of quality, with formal and informal arts support, will allow local communities and districts to work within their local contexts, thinking about what their

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families, local cultural institutions, and community organizations value, have, and need.

These conversations to establish state and local quality are the basis for building a partnership or coalition of the willing who will work to enact the vision of arts education for all youth. Once this partnership is grounded in what they value and want to see for their community—be it state or a city—then they can bring in national research to anchor their work and help them find measures for accountability and progress.

Websites at the National Endowment for the Arts and Understanding ESSA provide such resources. Another, published by Wallace as part of an initiative with the Boys & Girls Clubs and led by my colleague Bahia Ramos, Wallace's director of arts, is "Something to Say: Success Principles for Afterschool Arts Programs from Urban Youth and Other Experts." It used expert interviews, observation of effective programs, and market research to understand the views of parents and children in order to identify 10 elements of successful afterschool arts programs:

- skilled, professional artists as instructors
- dedicated, welcoming spaces
- cultivation of high expectations
- hands-on skill building
- opportunity for older youth participants to shape programs
- committed executive directors
- high-quality, culminating public events
- positive relationships with adult mentors and peers
- involvement of key stakeholders
- physical and emotional safety

In addition to investing in highly qualified instructors, it is important for schools and districts to provide ongoing professional development that extends to afterschool programming as well. "Raising the Barre and Stretching the Canvas: Implementing High Quality Arts Programming in a National Youth Serving Organization," a study by Research for Action and McClanahan Associates that Wallace funded, found that students deeply value professional teaching artists, but the artists need training to be truly effective.

In my experience, it was also important that school and district leaders provide students with a pathway to mastery that begins with introductory courses in elementary school and progresses to more advanced ones in middle and high school so that they can improve. This may require partnering with community agencies to provide programs that work in tandem with school instruction to fill gaps.

School and district leaders can look for ESSA funding opportunities, such as Title I, and they can tap evidence reviews that show which interventions meet the criteria for Title I funding. When state leaders are thinking about how to frame their 21st Century competitive grants to schools and districts, they could include arts education as an allowable funding option. They can look at what strands of money are available to fund arts education and make sure that schools and districts are aware of them. State leaders can advance quality programs by developing standards (and perhaps tools) not just for instruction, but also for the design of arts programs. Finally, they can establish minimum instruction requirements to ensure that children get adequate instruction.

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## **How do the challenges for increasing quality and access differ in rural and urban settings?**

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In rural communities, there is not immediate physical access to world-class arts institutions like a symphony, regional theater, ballet company, or art museum, nor do the artists who perform or produce works for these institutions typically live in rural settings. As a result, state and local leaders must find creative ways to bring the arts to students as well as students to the arts.

One example: In Amarillo, Texas, in the rural panhandle, an intermediary called Window on a Wider World, modeled after Big Thought, works to integrate the arts into the teaching of math, science, language arts, and social studies. The goal of WOWW, as it is known, is to teach to the state standards embodied in Texas Essential Knowledge & Skills.

Fortunately, more cultural institutions like the Metropolitan Opera are offering live streams of their performances and digital

access to their collections (like the National Gallery of Art) but also offer master classes with their artists, access to dress rehearsals, and other production-based arts learning. Arts learning cannot just be “sit and get.” State and local leaders can think about how to leverage programs like the traveling artist program at the National Endowment for the Arts or state programs like Arkansas Learning through the Arts, which send teaching artists across the state to provide on-site residency programming.

## How will policymakers and district leaders be able to tell that they are providing quality arts instruction and experiences? What role do state standards for the arts play?

There are multiple ways policymakers and district leaders can invest and track to ensure that they are providing quality arts instruction and experiences.

- Hiring and investing in instructors and staff with strong skills and the desire to improve those skills. Tracking to ensure quality can include a review of certifications, annual professional development, and arts productions or performances, and instructor and student feedback surveys.
- Supporting and monitoring instructors’ delivery of material and students’ ability to receive, internalize, and reproduce learning. Tracking to ensure quality teaching and learning can include direct observation using a rubric that scores staff and student behaviors .
- Ensuring that sequential learning opportunities exist for students to fully explore a discipline or field. Tracking to ensure quality includes collecting data on classes offered via school district and community arts programs, analyzing supply of sequential learning by art form and geographic footprint of students’ mobility. Is it sustained from elementary to middle school to high school? Are parents and children aware of the opportunities, and are school arts instructors and community arts educators connecting these opportunities into a pathway?
- Assessing and acknowledging strong student work and providing critical feedback.

Tracking to ensure quality includes reviewing the frequency of student performances and exhibitions that allow students to showcase their arts work and student surveys that reflect on the feedback they need and have received.

In Dallas, the whole arts community came together to identify and name the components of quality arts teaching and learning—what we called the Six Dimensions of Quality.

### ■ **Climate that Supports Creative Learning.**

Instructors and students create a respectful, organized, effective learning environment. Instructors establish this when they require good care and use of materials, instruments, and tools, and when they set routines to ensure safe and thorough work such as dancers’ warm-ups or the use of mirrors to check posture and positions.

### ■ **Engagement and Investment in Creative Learning.**

Instructors and students participate and contribute to bring the work to a higher level of quality.

### ■ **Dialogue and Sharing to Enhance Creative Learning.**

Students and educators discuss and share their joint work in order to develop ideas, take stock, formulate a direction for a project that everyone can debate and then share, or problem solve.

### ■ **Skills, Techniques, and Knowledge of the Field or Discipline.**

Young people need to learn about the history, traditions, materials, and works to which they are being introduced, and they develop this knowledge in many ways.

### ■ **Creative Processes and Choices.**

Young people need to learn to create original work, refine an existing performance or product, and interpret works made by others.

### ■ **Expectations, Assessment, and Recognition of Quality.**

Instructors and students set clear and high expectations, assess processes and products in the light of those expectations, and recognize and reward quality. ■