



The ESSA Arts Indicator in Illinois: A Study in the Art of Policymaking

Arts educators foster creativity in students through film production and jazz. They encourage community through student theatre and murals. They help build understanding among cultures of a school through dance. As they have demonstrated in Illinois, arts educators also develop effective public policy.

Illinois is one of two states with a distinct arts indicator (the other is Connecticut) as part of its Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) system of school accountability and support. Illinois is the only state applying the indicator to elementary as well as high schools.¹ The

development of this indicator provides a case study in how arts educators and state boards of education can partner in education policymaking.

Illinois policymakers and advocates chose to include the arts for many reasons. The arts are essential to a comprehensive education for all students, equipping them to succeed in college, careers, and life. Through dance, media arts, music, theatre, and visual arts, students learn to think critically, work collaboratively, and synthesize knowledge from diverse fields. Arts education fosters self-discipline, self-confidence,

Arts educators bring creativity and process expertise to their work on statewide accountability.

Jonathan VanderBrug

and self-reflection.² It also teaches students to solve problems creatively, and 70 percent of employers rate creativity as a primary concern when hiring.³

In addition, the arts help close the achievement gap. Arts education improves the writing test scores of elementary and middle school students and increases student engagement.⁴ Low-income students who have arts-rich experiences in high school are more than three times as likely to earn a bachelor's degree. They are also more likely to obtain promising employment, volunteer in their communities, and vote.⁵

Arts Indicator Work Group

Recognizing the essential value of the arts, the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) included the arts as an indicator of school quality and student success in the state's ESSA plan, which the U.S. Department of Education approved in August 2017. The indicator currently has no weight in Illinois's accountability and support system, but in 2017, the Illinois board committed to weighting the indicator after a sound method of measurement is determined. The Illinois Arts Indicator Work Group formed in January 2018, and the board asked it to recommend both the measure and weight.

Chaired by Arts Alliance Illinois and the Chicago-based nonprofit Ingenuity, the work group was statewide and diverse. It consisted of 27 members, including arts education organizations, administrators, teachers, unions, higher education, researchers, and other key stakeholders.

The work group also formed a data and research team, which conducted the most extensive analysis to date of Illinois statewide arts education data. It examined multiyear scenarios using relevant, school-level data, and it assisted the work group in exploring and testing possible measures for the indicator.

After more than a year of deliberations, the work group recommended a composite measure that combines student participation in arts coursework, quality of instruction, and student voice and provides a comprehensive, nuanced picture of the arts in Illinois schools. It recommended using these same submeasures for elementary and high schools.

The work group recommended that the indicator take effect and receive 5 percent weight,

starting with the 2020–21 school year and phasing in over three years:

- Year 1 considers only *student participation*, defined as the percentage of students enrolled in arts coursework, and weights it at 5 percent.
- Year 2 (2021–22) adds *quality of instruction*, looking at the extent to which arts-enrolled students are receiving their arts instruction from a qualified teacher. This quality submeasure receives 2 percent weight, and participation receives 3 percent.
- Year 3 (2022–23) incorporates *student voice* but weights the submeasure at zero percent to reflect the need to address the challenges of a student survey.

The work group incorporated provisions to avoid punishing lower-funded schools. For example, schools can receive partial points for attaining meaningful rates below targets. The recommended measure also distinguishes between schools in lower- and higher-funded districts and through the 2021–22 school year applies to schools in lower-funded districts only if it raises their summative score.

As a result, the arts indicator is the only Illinois indicator to account for school funding. “In its first two years, it will go beyond holding schools in lower-funded districts harmless,” the work group notes in its report. “It will give them the opportunity to increase their score if they are already making strides in the arts. It will make Illinois's accountability system more equitable.”⁶

The work group submitted its final recommendation to the state board in December 2018. The state board then held a public comment period on the recommendation during January–February 2019. When the newly elected governor, JB Pritzker, appointed a new state board in March, the work group presented its recommendation again.

The state board is now conducting a full review of the state's ESSA plan and considering changes. Through listening sessions and a survey, the state board invited public input on the plan during summer 2019. Throughout these public comment periods, the state board heard overwhelming support for the Arts Indicator Work Group's recommendation, which remains before it for consideration.

The work group recommended a composite measure that combines student participation in arts coursework, quality of instruction, and student voice.

“Arts educators have been in the forefront of the ESSA process in Illinois,” said Dr. Christine Benson, a state board member and a longtime arts educator. “It’s essential that we include the arts in accountability systems.”

What Arts Educators Bring to the Policy Table

Regardless of the eventual shape of the overall plan the board approves, the Illinois Arts Indicator Work Group and its process shed light on how arts educators and state boards across the country can collaborate to create innovative policy. It demonstrates the many strengths that arts educators bring to the policy table: audacious, big-picture thinking rooted in process; creativity; and a penchant for promoting expression and grassroots participation. Arts educators bring these strengths to the classroom every day, and they bring them to state policy discussions as well.

The work group recognized that its task stretched into relatively new territory. Traditional, scalable metrics such as standardized test scores cannot capture the impact of arts learning. No similar statewide K-12 arts education measurement existed elsewhere in the country. There was no blueprint to follow.

Artists, however, do not shy away from large, open-ended questions. By the very nature of their profession, they are skilled at using the unfamiliar to catalyze new ideas. “Artists and arts educators are comfortable with questioning the status quo,” said Erick Deshaun Dorris, chair of the Joliet Arts Commission and member of the Joliet School District 86 Board of Inspectors. “They bring fearlessness to civic practice.”⁷

The work group adopted “audaciousness” as one of its guiding principles, “seeing opportunity in challenges and willing to consider new approaches.”⁸ It began its deliberations with blue-sky thinking. Group members together generated a list of 42 ideal measures, and these possibilities drove discussion. As a result, the work group went beyond focusing solely on students’ access to arts courses and instead developed an innovative, three-component measure that enables schools to tell a fuller story of their arts education success.

The work group also took an audacious approach to data. It recognized that “a key step for state policymakers is learning what the data

say about where arts are taught.”⁹ The work group’s data and research team analyzed the past five years of arts-related data from every K-12 school in the state, such as data on teacher certifications and student enrollment in the arts, as well as data on school funding.

By combining this information into an interactive data tool, developed by Ingenuity, the team enabled the work group to explore a variety of possible measures. Seeking a measure that would not penalize underfunded schools, the work group paid particular attention to the impact of school funding. The research team, however, found no strong correlation between school funding and student arts participation in Illinois schools.¹⁰

Guiding Principles

Arts educators also contribute a sensitivity to process. Just as Illinois’ arts learning standards, updated in 2016, derive their central structure from the artistic processes, how policies are made is central to achieving a vision. The work group therefore began by identifying the principles that its recommended measure would need to meet and principles to guide the deliberative process. Reached by consensus, these principles kept the work group grounded. Every meeting agenda listed the principles at the bottom, and members would often reference them to keep discussions focused and on track.

The work group agreed that its recommended measure would be student-centered, actionable, and aligned with the state’s overall goals for education. The measure would be fair and sensitive to resource constraints.

Process-guiding principles included transparency, focus, inclusivity, and collaboration. The work group’s meetings were open to the public and accessible to statewide participants through various means, such as video conferencing, and the work group never finalized decisions in person. It used a shared folder to distribute information, pose questions, gauge opinions, and document consensus. It also regularly updated the field through the newsletters and social media channels of its members.

It drew in a wide array of stakeholders. The openness of the arts often predispose arts educators to inviting, respecting, and incorporating diverse perspectives. As the group said in its

Process-guiding principles included transparency, focus, inclusivity, and collaboration.

■
“We are teaching students to use their voices through artistic expression so they are ready to use their voices in all spheres of life.”

report to the state board, “The arts classroom is often a school’s most democratic space, where students of all levels learn to respect each other’s unique contributions and to work collaboratively.”¹¹

Throughout the work group’s process and subsequent public comment periods, Arts Alliance Illinois gave over 20 presentations and workshops introducing ESSA and the arts indicator recommendation to the field. The Alliance and partner organizations also held webinars, open to all, that explained ESSA terminology. The Alliance and Ingenuity partnered with State Matters, an Illinois civic education organization comprising designers and theatre actors, to create a video to explain the arts indicator recommendation in everyday language.¹²

As a result, arts educators raised awareness of ESSA among not only the arts community but also non-arts education stakeholders. “ESSA can be daunting to people who are not education policy experts,” said Karla Rivera, co-chair of the Arts Indicator Work Group. “The arts have provided an engaging way for the grassroots to learn about ESSA and to participate in the policymaking process.”¹³

To date, ISBE has received more than 5,500 comments in support of the arts indicator—more than the combined total of all other comments related to ESSA. In addition, supporters of the arts indicator testified at every one of ISBE’s 2019 ESSA statewide listening tour stops.

Student Voice

The arts have proved especially effective at empowering students to express their own values and views. Reflecting the centrality of student voice, the work group incorporated it into its process and recommendation. Many of the work group’s meetings began with students sharing their artwork. A duo of high school seniors from Chicago Public Schools performed a jazz composition by Sonny Rollins, the Central Illinois Poetry Out Loud champion recited Emily Brontë, and a fifth grader from far southern Illinois shared her self-portraits. Each of the students discussed why the arts matter to them, and their presentations focused, informed, and energized the work group’s deliberations.

Students also voiced their perspectives via public comment. For example, through a student-organized campaign, more than 150

dance students at Curie Metropolitan High School in Chicago sent ISBE comments of support for the arts indicator. In testimony submitted to ISBE, a middle-school student from DuPage cut to the chase: “It’s about what the students think.... Students can express their feelings and their culture through art.”

The work group took student input so seriously that it embedded student voice into its recommendation as a submeasure. “This submeasure is vital to honestly evaluating the state of arts education within a school,” said Jessica Kwasny, a work group member who teaches at Eugene Field Elementary School in Park Ridge, a Chicago suburb. “We are teaching students to use their voices through artistic expression so they are ready to use their voices in all spheres of life.”¹⁴

How State Boards Can Engage the Arts Education Community

Arts-informed policymaking succeeds only when the arts education community and state boards of education work together. Both understand the power of collaboration and vision. In Illinois, this collaboration is grounded in arts experiences, the board’s invitation to the arts education community, ongoing partnership, and commitment to policy support.

Experiencing Student Art. To open policymaking to arts educators, state board members must first have the arts on their mind. When policy discussions leave out arts educators, it is often due not to disregard but to forgetting. Policymakers value arts learning, but they unintentionally overlook it because the education system frequently emphasizes other subject areas.

State board members should periodically and purposely immerse themselves in student artwork. Attend a local high school’s theatre performance or band concert. Pause to look at the student paintings in the hallway when visiting an elementary school. At the start of her tenure as state superintendent, Dr. Carmen Ayala invited students to lend her their artwork to display in ISBE’s offices—expressions of student creativity in the rooms where policy discussions occur. The state board also sponsors an Illinois Arts Education Week each year.

By experiencing and celebrating student artwork, state boards and their members signal

the importance of arts learning and encourage inclusion of the arts education community in policy development. At the same time, experiencing student artwork brings joy and meaning. It can inspire and reinforce a sense of purpose in serving students.

Invitation. As a next step, state boards can invite arts educators to policy discussions, even discussions that are seemingly unrelated to the arts. The arts education community shares responsibility and must take initiative to participate, but it does not always know all the venues where policy discussions occur. State boards can help point arts educators toward those venues.

In the early stages of ESSA implementation, for example, Illinois arts educators were unsure how to feed their ideas into the development of the state's ESSA plan. Policymakers recommended that they participate in advisory bodies such as the Illinois P-20 Council's Data, Assessment, and Accountability Committee (DAA), which welcomed the arts education perspective. Involvement with DAA led to connections with existing indicator work groups, whose experience informed the Arts Indicator Work Group's process.

In addition, Illinois state board members invited the arts education community to testify during ESSA public comment periods, and several board members met individually with arts education advocates. By listening to these advocates and asking insightful questions, these board members invited them to stay engaged and continue contributing during ESSA implementation.

State boards should also note that the arts are plural. They include five disciplines: dance, media arts, visual arts, music, and theatre, each with its own associated knowledge, skills, and processes. As a result, the more of the disciplines the board engages, the richer the policy conversations.

Ongoing Partnership. Inclusion of the arts indicator in the Illinois ESSA state plan was not a beginning but a continuation. It built upon the successful updating of arts learning standards, an 18-month statewide initiative that began in 2015 and was coordinated by Arts Alliance Illinois in partnership with ISBE.

The Alliance formed and facilitated a diverse steering committee of arts organizations to guide the initiative's process, as well as an advisory

committee of leading Illinois arts educators to develop the updated standards. The initiative included focus groups and surveys of the field. The committees also organized community engagement sessions and presented their findings and recommendation to the state board.

These efforts not only modernized Illinois's arts learning standards, they helped pave the way—in leadership structure, public awareness, and momentum—for the ESSA arts indicator. The state's arts education sector grew more cohesive, organized, and clear in its advocacy. Mutual appreciation and understanding between arts educators and the state board grew as well. Many of the standards committee members also provided leadership (formally or informally) to the Arts Indicator Work Group.

Commitment. Too often, the arts become the window dressing of education policy: State leaders acknowledge and compliment the arts but ultimately pass by them when reviewing and reforming the system. State boards can change this dynamic through explicit support and policy action.

ISBE has modeled this commitment. In approving the ESSA state plan in 2017, it unanimously supported the arts indicator, committing ISBE to weight it when a sound method of measurement was determined. By formalizing this commitment in foundational policy, the board set the stage for the arts education community to continue contributing vision, voice, and creativity to ESSA policy development.

When Arts Alliance Illinois and Ingenuity volunteered to bring diverse stakeholders together to form the Arts Indicator Work Group, ISBE again responded with commitment. Through the Midwest Comprehensive Center of the American Institutes for Research, it helped facilitate work group meetings and provided guidance in process implementation. In addition, ISBE readily furnished the work group with data necessary to conduct in-depth analysis of possible measures.

Benson summed it up. "What we measure matters," she said. "Illinois's support and accountability system will include a fine arts indicator as the result of collaborative engagement with arts education advocates. Including fine arts in accountability emphasizes their essentialness as part of a basic education."

State boards should note that the arts include five disciplines: dance, media arts, visual arts, music, and theatre.

Jonathan VanderBrug is deputy director, civics education, at Arts Alliance Illinois, and he co-chaired the Illinois Arts Indicator Work Group.

cont'd from page 9...Using ESSA to Leverage Arts
the arts, please share those with the arts education community. Sharing your stories and ideas will help create a vibrant educational environment that includes the arts for all students, not just those with privileged access. ■

¹Lynn Tuttle, "How Does Arts Education Fare in the Final Round of State ESSA Plan Submissions?" *EdNote* blog (Denver, CO: Education Commission of the States, January 18, 2018).

²Georgia Department of Education, "Title IV, Part A stART Grant," web page, <https://www.gadoe.org/School-Improvement/Federal-Programs/Pages/Grants.aspx>.

³Arts Indicator Work Group, "Arts Indicator Recommendation," presentation to the Illinois State Board of Education on January 16, 2019, https://www.isbe.net/Documents_Board_Meetings/Illinois-Arts-Indicator-Work-Group-Presentation.pdf.

⁴Valerie Norville, "Focusing on Gaps in Access to Arts Education," *Policy Update* 23, no. 1 (Alexandria, VA: NASBE, July 2018).

⁵Brent Johnson, "N.J. Just Reached This Education Milestone, Murphy Says," *NJ.com* (September 9, 2019).

cont'd from page 25...The ESSA Arts Indicator

State boards of education face numerous policy challenges, but arts educators are ready allies and able ones. They bring innovative insight to policymaking and foster collaboration and grassroots participation. Together, arts educators and state board members can succeed in the art of policymaking. ■

¹Arts Education Partnership, "ESSA: Mapping Opportunities for the Arts" (Denver: Education Commission of the States, February 2019), p. 7.

²Illinois Arts Learning Standards, "Illinois Arts Learning Standards Initiative: Recommendations for Updated Arts Learning Standards and Their Implementation," Report to the Illinois State Board of Education, February 2016, p. 6.

³James Lichtenberg et al., "Ready to Innovate" (New York: The Conference Board, 2008), 13–14.

⁴Daniel H. Bowen and Brian Kisida, "Investigating Causal Effects of Arts Education Experiences: Experimental Evidence from Houston's Arts Access Initiative" (Houston: Houston Education Research Consortium, Rice University, 2019), 2.

⁵James S. Catterall, Susan A. Dumais, and Gillian Hampden-Thompson, "The Arts and Achievement in At-Risk Youth: Findings from Four Longitudinal Studies" (Washington, DC: National Endowment for the Arts, 2012), pp. 18–21 and 24.

⁶Illinois Arts Indicator Work Group, "Illinois Arts Indicator Recommendation Report," December 18, 2019, p. 3, <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1UE4zLjVv6u6bfjOqvRjtjdrQrR6E9Rhw/view>.

⁷Erick Deshaun Dorris, personal communication, September 30, 2019.

⁸Arts Indicator Work Group, "Recommendation Report," 5.

⁹Valerie Norville, "Focusing on Gaps in Access to Arts Education," *State Innovations* 23, no. 1 (Alexandria, VA: National Association of State Boards of Education, July 2018), 1.

¹⁰Arts Indicator Work Group, "Recommendation Report," 10 and 20.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 6.

¹²State Matters, "ESSA Fine Arts Indicator: Say What?" Vimeo video, 2:55, posted by Arts Alliance Illinois, January 29, 2019, <https://vimeo.com/314079047>.

¹³Karla Rivera, personal communication, October 7, 2019.

¹⁴Jessica Kwasny, personal communication, October 2, 2019.

cont'd from page 29...Advancing Arts Educator

administrators, reform activists, and foundation supporters.⁹ As of fall 2019, work on the next steps continues—recruiting participants, securing additional funding, and further developing the policy agenda.

At the same time, ADE, ACA, and AzCA continue to build relationships with state board members and other state policymakers to leverage existing resources, even as they seek expanded support for arts education. Work also proceeds on developing valid student achievement assessments, mining the arts census data, engaging teachers and schools in federal and state grant programs. ■

¹Edward B. Fiske, "Champions of Change: The Impact of Arts on Learning" (Washington, DC: President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities and Arts Education Partnership, 1999); "Progress and Promise: 10 years of Arts Education Model Development and Dissemination Program," (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, 2011); James S. Catterall et al., "The Arts and Achievement in At Risk Youth: Findings from Four Longitudinal Studies" (Washington, DC: National Endowment for the Arts, 2012).

²"State Pilot Policy Program Summary and Findings," (Washington, DC: Americans for the Arts, 2017).

³Robert Morrison, "Arizona Arts Education Census: A Comprehensive Survey of Arts Education in the Arizona Schools" (Shaker Heights, OH: Cypress Research Group and Quadrant Arts Education Research, 2010).

⁴Robert Morrison, "Arts Education in the Arizona Public Schools for the 2012/2013 School Year," prepared for the Arizona Commission on the Arts and the Arizona Department of Education by Quadrant Research, 2014.

⁵Robert Morrison, "Arts Education Data Project Arizona: Executive Summary," prepared as part of the Arts Education Data Project administered by State Agency Directors of Arts Education, Arizona Department of Education, Arizona Commission on the Arts, and Arizona Citizens for the Arts, 2018.

⁶Arizona Arts Standards, web page, (Phoenix: Arizona Department of Education, 2015), <https://www.azed.gov/standards-practices/k-12standards/arts-standards/>.

⁷Arizona Administrative Code R7-2-301, Minimum Course of Study and Competency Goals for Students in the Common Schools.

⁸"Strengthening Schools through Arts Partnerships, Evaluation Summary, 2016 & 2017," (Phoenix: Arizona Commission on the Arts, 2018).

⁹"Arts Education Advocacy Initiative" (Phoenix: Arizona Citizens for the Arts, 2019).