



EDUCATION



# ***Improving Arts Learning Opportunities for Pittsburgh Public School Students***

**Sarah Tambucci Catherine Augustine Delphina Briscoe**

**Presentation to the PPS Board Education Committee  
January 2009**

# ***Study Designed to Understand PPS District Context for Arts Education***

- **Conducted by Arts Education Collaborative and RAND over 9 months**
- **Funded by the Heinz and Grable Foundations**
- **Designed in concert with district leadership**
- **Conducted to understand context for and state of arts education provision and access within Pittsburgh Public School District**
- **Focused on in-school programming**
- **Conducted within an environment of change in the district (enrollment, restructuring, program improvement, etc.)**

***By arts education, we mean the visual arts, music, dance, and theatre***

# ***Arts Education Considered Important for Numerous Reasons Among Them:***

- Engage youth who are not being reached through traditional schooling
- Develop creative, analytical, disciplined, self-confident citizens
- Prepare tomorrow's employees to solve problems, communicate ideas, and be sensitive to the world around them
- Educate artists and consumers of the arts

# ***Study Approach Focused on District Context and National Best Practices***

- **Surveyed 56 of 67 PPS principals (84%) and 146 of 242 certified arts specialists (60%)**
- **Conducted 36 interviews of board members, district officials, principals, community organizations**
- **Analyzed district documents**
- **Analyzed district data on provision and enrollment**
- **Conducted telephone interviews with arts education coordinators from 8 districts across nation**
- **Performed targeted literature review**

# ***What Questions Guided This Study?***

- **What opportunities do PPS students have to participate in the arts during the school day?**
- **What are the key strengths and challenges regarding arts education provision in the PPS?**
- **How can arts education opportunities for students be improved?**

## ***Key Strengths Bolster Arts Education in District***

- **Key champions throughout district and in community**
- **District-funded personnel, instruments, materials, equipment**
- **Dedicated certified arts specialists**
  - Declines mirror declines in student enrollment
  - Described by principals as committed and skilled
  - Desire more professional development
- **Examples of arts-infused programs throughout district**
- **Sophisticated, committed arts organizations, funders**

# ***Most Students Participate in the Arts***

- Vast majority of students in K-5 grades are participating in visual arts and music classes
- Participation in the arts declines in grade 6, with fewer students participating in high school
- Small group of high school students dedicated to the arts
  - 20% take at least 8 semesters of arts in high school
  - 9% take at least 8 visual arts courses in high school
- 11% of high school seniors across the district in 2006-07 had taken no arts course in high school

## ***Provision Idiosyncratic Across District***

- Although there is greater participation in lower grades, there is variance across K-5 schools
- Ratio of students to arts teachers varies across schools as well
- Neither is access equal *within* each school
- But no differences by race or poverty level on participation in arts courses across district
  - Female students more likely to engage in the arts in high school



## ***Arts Education Provision Primarily Driven by Principals in PPS***

- **State standards mandate arts education knowledge and skills**
- **PPS policy does not require arts education**
- **Principals are primary decision-makers on amount of arts education offered in each school**
  - **Report that NCLB is biggest challenge to offering arts**
  - **Rely on district guidance, own values, resources, student demand, advocacy efforts of others**
  - **No levers to hold principals accountable for offering arts**

## ***No Clear Benchmarks for Judging Students' Opportunities in PPS***

- Districts across the country are reducing time for the arts due to NCLB
- Provision patterns in PPS are similar to those found in our 8 comparison districts
- However, idiosyncratic provision across district stands in contrast to state standards on arts education
- District has no policy against which to judge progress

***And opportunities exist for improvement, particularly given vibrant cultural sector in city***

## ***Indications That Quality Could be Improved***

- **Lack of written district-wide curriculum**
  - **For music, dance, and drama**
  - **For visual arts in grades 6-12**
  - **Variance in curricular resources across arts disciplines and grade levels**
- **Teachers' reliance on performance and production over teaching to all state standards**
- **No district-level arts assessment to ascertain rigor and quality**
- **Teachers' desire for more and different professional development**

## ***Also Room for Improvement Regarding Relationships With Community***

- In-school provision includes programming through partnerships with over 60 community arts organizations
- Teachers, principals, community organizations value community partnerships
  - But all three groups acknowledge creating them is challenging
  - Many in community believe district is intentionally preventing them from working with schools
- Misunderstandings abound among district and community arts representatives on district's protocol on establishing, maintaining, evaluating partnerships

## ***Presentations on Findings and Recommendations***

- **Superintendent – November 2008**
- **PPS Board of Education – January 2009**
- **Principals – January 2009**
- **Arts Educators – January 2009**

## ***Next Steps***

- **Identify working committee members**
- **Invite participation (Superintendent)**
- **Convene working committee**