

Bell-to-bell No-cell Leverages Investments in the Arts Gordon R. Mitchell

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November 24, 2025, 6 p.m. Public Hearing
Pittsburgh Public Schools Administration Building, Pittsburgh, PA

Thank you for the chance to speak tonight.

Slide 64 of the ERS Final Report claims, “Smaller K-5 schools are typically allocated too few related arts teachers to have dedicated Art, Music and PE teachers” (see Fig. 1).¹

The Future-Ready Implementation Plan appears to address this on page 46, proposing to hire 145 “Related Arts Teachers” in the early startup window, by far the largest personnel growth category the plan (see Fig. 2).²

Setting aside important parts of Plan for others to address, tonight I focus on how this strategy of arts-driven school system change has evidence-based support in the educational literature.

In a randomized controlled trial with 10,000 students enrolled in 42 schools across the Houston area, Rice University researchers published

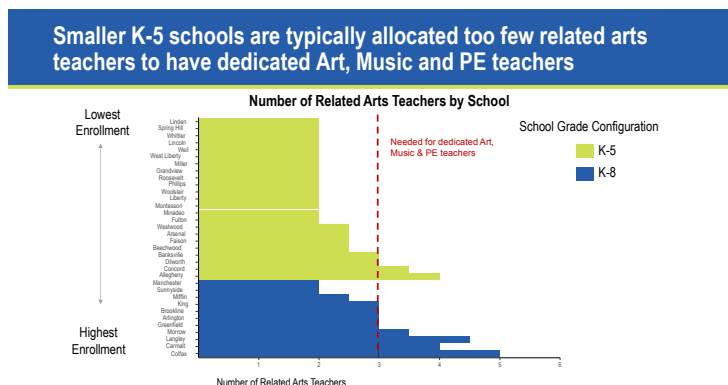


Figure 1. ERS, Reimagined School Portfolio, Slide 64.

DISTRICTWIDE STAFFING PROJECTIONS
SCHOOL-BASED STAFFING PROJECTIONS
 2026-27 → 2027-28 Continued

TYPE OF POSITION	SY 2026-2027 Total Budget Number	SY 2027-2028 Projected Year	Average Separations Yearly	Projected Hires or Fullfills (-)
CAREER + TECHNICAL EDUCATION (CTE) TEACHERS	22.5	44	4	25.5
RELATED ARTS TEACHER* <small>Includes Art, Music, PE, World Language, Career Exploration, CTE Electives, High School Electives - Math, English, etc.</small>	179.5	302.5	22	145
COUNSELOR / SOCIAL WORKER	75	48		0
LIBRARIAN	24.5	46.5	3	25
SECRETARY	44	44	10	10
STUDENT DATA SYSTEMS SPECIALIST (SDSS)	26.5	25	8	6.5

Figure 2. PPS, Future-Ready Implementation Plan, p. 46

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¹ Education Resource Strategies, *A Reimagined School Portfolio in Pittsburgh Public Schools*, October 15, 2024, Slide 64, https://resources.finalsite.net/images/v1729107879/pghschoolsorg/r4en6hletiluv99uru8/ERSBoardMaterials_Draft_Sent_10-09.pdf

² Pittsburgh Public Schools, *PPS Future-Ready Implementation Plan*, October 20, 2025, p. 46, <https://www.pghschools.org/about/superintendent-of-schools/future-ready>

peer reviewed findings showing that arts-learning experiences increase compassion for others, improve writing achievement and drive college aspirations.³

A peer reviewed, randomized control trial out of Boston, Massachusetts found that “students receiving the arts in school attend more, are more engaged, and their parents and teachers are more likely to participate and be engaged at school, with larger effects for students with individualized education plans, students with lower standardized test scores, and students with a history of chronic absenteeism.”⁴

It is said the eminent teacher Sydney Gurewitz Clemens once quipped, “Art has the role in education of helping children become themselves instead of more like everyone else.”

This can be easier said than done in a digital age where smartphone apps nudge children to form identities out of mercurial likes and follows—a refined system of social comparison that distracts and divides more than it builds community.⁵

Strengthening the arts, therefore, is not just enrichment. It is a direct response to the cultural forces shaping how our students understand themselves.

Yet strong research now shows that in-school cellphone use weakens focus, erodes classroom culture, and limits students’ ability to sustain the deeper attention required for artistic and creative work.⁶ Districts that have adopted bell-to-bell cellphone restrictions have seen meaningful improvements in climate and engagement.⁷

For example, there are big changes just a few miles away at Seneca Valley, where a new bell-to-bell policy has just gone into effect. In testimony delivered November 12 to a Pennsylvania State Senate Committee, Seneca Valley counselor Lisa Graham notes a “significant increase in face-to-face communication” and positive academic impact, with a Seneca Valley Art teacher

³ Daniel H. Bowen and Brian Kisida, “Investigating the Causal Effects of Arts Education,” *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, 42 (2022): 624-647, <https://doi.org/10.1002/pam.22449>; see also Helen Buck-Pavlick, “Dance for ALL: Innovative Approaches to School Improvement,” *Arts Education Policy Review* (2025), Epub ahead of print, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10632913.2025.2476959>

⁴ Daniel H. Bowen and Brian Kisida, “Investigating Arts Education Effects on School Engagement and Climate,” *Educational Policy* 38 (2023): 1077-1107. <https://doi.org/10.1177/08959048231174880>

⁵ Johan Hari, *Stolen Focus* (New York: Crown, 2023).

⁶ National Association of Attorneys General, Letter to Congressional Leaders, September 9, 2024, https://www.naag.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/SM-Warning-Label-Letter_FINAL.pdf; and Yunyu Xiao, et al., “Addictive Screen Use Trajectories and Suicidal Behaviors, Suicidal Ideation, and Mental Health in US Youths,” *Journal of the American Medical Association* 334 (2025): 219–228, doi:10.1001/jama.2025.7829

⁷ See Tim Pressley and David T. Marshall, “Lessons from the Implementation of Virginia’s Cell Phone Policy,” Plains Research Consortium White Paper (2025), <https://aurora.auburn.edu/bitstream/handle/11200/50683/Lessons%20from%20Implementing%20Virginia%27s%20Cell%20Phone%20Policy.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>; Kim Shaw, “Implementing Phone-Free Schools—Insights from Arkansas Administrators,” University of Arkansas Office for Education Policy White Paper 22 (October 2025), <https://oep.uark.edu/implementing-phone-free-schools-insights-from-arkansas-administrators/>

saying, “students’ art is better this year.” Without the distraction of phones, they are “taking more time to refine and improve their work.”⁸

Further, Graham notes: “Research consistently shows that students from lower-income backgrounds—who are disproportionately affected by device-driven distraction and online harms—stand to benefit the most from strong, consistent phone-free policies.”⁹

Bottom line: Whether you vote tomorrow or revise the Plan and vote in the New Year, keep the arts hiring surge and protect those learning gains from eroding with a district-wide bell-to-bell cellphone restriction.

⁸ Lisa Graham, “Bell-to-Bell Cell Phone Policy in Pennsylvania Public Schools,” written testimony presented to the Pennsylvania State Senate Education & Health Committees, November 12, 2025, https://www.pahouse.com/files/Documents/Testimony/2025-11-14_094329__Cell%20Phones%20in%20Schools%20Full%20Testimony.pdf

⁹ Graham, “Bell-to-Bell.”