

The Arts in Charter Schools

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More than [3.3 million students](#) attend over 7,500 charter schools located in the United States. High school charter schools are [less likely](#) to offer courses in the arts than traditional public schools, though they may receive greater [autonomy](#) to design and implement curricula and schoolwide focus areas. While they have flexibilities that traditional public schools may not, school leader commitment, educator collaboration and stakeholder engagement are key to the creation and implementation of comprehensive arts or arts-integrated programs in charter schools.

Engagement in arts learning can have positive and lasting effects on student outcomes and future success. Benefits can span disciplines, including dance, media arts, music, theatre and visual arts. Research shows that participation in the arts equips students with [foundational skills](#) for learning and supports [student success](#) and [continued achievement](#). Engagement in the arts also fosters [deeper learning skills](#), such as collaboration and perseverance, which can contribute to an individual's citizenship, college readiness and career. The [benefits](#) of arts education can be especially significant for students who are at risk of low academic achievement and of dropping out of high school because of limited access to resources and opportunities. Additionally, the arts can [positively affect](#) school culture by creating an environment that fosters student success, supports staff collaboration and development, and promotes community and family engagement.

States began enacting legislation related to charter school development nearly 30 years ago, which increased flexibility within K-12 education. These innovations had the potential to extend to public schools across the country. Today, enacted [state policies](#) impact charter-school preferences and approval: who may apply to open a charter school; and rules related to assessment, graduation requirements, standards and teacher certification, including those that are specific to [arts education](#).

Nevertheless, charter schools can use their flexibilities — while meeting state requirements — to innovate curricula and programs through arts education and to engage the arts in school culture.

The Arts Education Partnership collected information for this report through electronic correspondence with leaders from four charter schools located in the **District of Columbia, Louisiana, Maryland** and **North Carolina**, and from two additional schools' websites. AEP selected schools based on their curricula, approaches to learning, student populations, and staff and community engagement, among other considerations.

This resource looks at how arts-based charter schools provide access to arts education and how they integrate the arts schoolwide across three topic areas:

| [Curriculum and Approaches to Learning](#)

| [Community Engagement and Partnerships](#)

| [Professional Development and Support for Educators](#)

Charter schools are tuition-free, semi-autonomous public schools that receive public funding and operate under a written charter with an authorizer (also referred to as a sponsor).

Curriculum and Approaches to Learning

Charter school flexibilities allow schools to develop and deliver a comprehensive and innovative arts education curriculum. They engage students in an arts-themed educational environment or apply arts integration across all academic subject areas, while meeting state and national academic standards. Some states, including **Massachusetts** and **North Carolina**, have laws that enable authorizers to give preference to schools that implement well-rounded learning experiences and offer specific academic approaches or themes and innovations.

Arts-Themed Schools

Arts-themed schools focus on the arts as part of the schoolwide curriculum and may use arts-integration methods to teach other core subjects. These schools typically offer students opportunities to focus their academic career on specific arts disciplines across grade levels. They also support the continued development of competencies in independent disciplines and prepare students to continue their trajectory in the arts when transitioning to another grade, college or the workforce.

Massachusetts' [Pioneer Valley Performing Arts Charter Public School](#) provides middle and high school students from more than 60 towns with access to arts education courses and activities like dance, music, theatre, visual arts and technical theatre (the production aspects of a performance), as well as courses in other academic subjects. In addition to an arts-focused curriculum, the school supports the development and connection of creative and critical thinking skills, and it integrates the arts into the schoolwide curriculum. (All students are required to take a minimum of eight hours of performing arts programs per week each semester.) Students are immersed in the performing arts through a college preparatory curriculum that aligns with state and national standards. They can also participate in one of the many performing arts focus areas, including dance choreography, digital design and costume production.

Arts-Integrated Schools

[Arts integration](#) is a holistic approach to educating students that incorporates arts education into other core school curricula and helps establish and build relationships between learning in the arts and other subjects. An arts-integrated school may engage the arts throughout the entire curriculum or in certain subjects, while offering arts-specific courses.

At [Bridges Public Charter School](#) in the **District of Columbia**, students participate in an arts education curriculum from early childhood through fifth grade. The curriculum provides youth with opportunities to participate in drama, music and visual arts; and all pre-K and kindergarten students attend both music and visual art classes each week. In elementary school, students explore practices across arts disciplines and receive arts-integrated lessons in other academic subjects, including science and social studies courses. The arts-integrated lessons are informed by the [Universal Design for Learning Guidelines](#) to help reach different types of learners.

“Bridges serves students with a wide variety of learning differences. We believe that the arts can help support both academic and social-emotional learning for all learners; and we strive to include art opportunities whenever possible, either through arts integration, community partnerships or arts education classes.

— **KRISTIN ANCLIEN**

Arts Integration Coordinator, Bridges Public Charter School

CONSIDERATIONS FOR CURRICULUM AND APPROACHES TO LEARNING

- Require robust standards-based arts learning and arts integration in addition to experiences with teaching artists to provide comprehensive arts education.
- Consider a weekly arts course requirement for students.
- Include the arts as a career focus in college and career readiness programs.
- Explore the role of the arts in school culture through arts-focused and arts-integrated experiences.

Community Engagement and Partnerships

Arts-themed and arts-integrated charter schools often build relationships with community arts organizations and other nonprofits, and these partnerships support programs that engage students in the arts both in and out of the classroom. [Twenty-two states](#) have enacted legislation related to state arts education grant programs or state schools for the arts, which may apply to public charter schools. These policies can support the development of community partnerships through increased funding that enables schools to expand arts education and arts experiences during [after-school hours](#). Examples of this exist in **Colorado** as well as in **New Mexico**, through a [state chartered](#), arts-based charter school. Charter schools can take a variety of approaches to engaging community organizations in their work, including in their governing structures, program offerings and operations.

School Governance

Forty-five states and the **District of Columbia** have [laws](#) that govern charter schools, some of which determine who can open a charter school, such as a nonprofit organization, an existing public school or school district, or an individual. **Louisiana** is one state that allows a nonprofit organization to apply to open a charter school. In 2013, Young Audiences of Louisiana — an affiliate of the national [Young Audiences Arts for Learning](#) organization — founded a charter school that delivers an arts-integrated curriculum (focused on Louisiana’s comprehensive academic curriculum and standards) to students in kindergarten through ninth grade. [Young Audiences Charter School](#) and YALA operate with separate boards of directors, but YALA provides comprehensive arts and arts integration support for the school, including coordination of services from community arts partners and arts-based field trips for students.

Out-of-School Engagement

[ArtSpace Charter School](#) is part of the [A+ Schools Program of North Carolina](#)’s network of 41 schools at the [North Carolina Arts Council](#). Its arts-integrated curriculum provides students in kindergarten through eighth grade with creative writing, dance, drama, music and visual arts courses that align with national and state standards. A+ Schools takes multiple approaches to arts education, including identifying opportunities for its staff and students to participate in arts experiences outside of school and in their communities. In the past, ArtSpace Charter School collaborated on a national work of art and engaged in national initiatives that cultivate inclusive and safe environments and support the development of social justice strategies.

Partnerships With Community Organizations

Maryland’s [City Neighbors Charter School](#) partners with local community organization [Arts Every Day](#) to create school-based residencies for artists, during which they work with educators to develop arts-

integrated lessons in other academic subjects. The school also works with Young Audiences of Maryland to provide arts engagement activities both in and out of the classroom, and teachers have the flexibility to independently create partnerships with organizations and artists. The [Sallie B. Howard School for the Arts and Education](#) in **North Carolina** is another school that works closely with the community on arts-focused events and projects, including arts competitions and exhibits, community theatre performances and public concerts. The school also engages guest artists to conduct demonstration lessons, master classes and workshops.

Bridges Public Charter School provides enrichment programming through in-school teaching artist residencies (including a movement program that is inclusive to students with special needs), dance residencies, and an integrated drama and social studies program — all through partnerships with local community organizations.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND PARTNERSHIPS

- Develop established, multiyear relationships with local artists and community arts organizations to provide sustained, intensive arts experiences and career modeling for students.
- Work with community organizations to provide students with access to learning opportunities across arts disciplines and exposure to art careers, such as theatre production and exhibition development.
- Provide arts education opportunities both in and out of the classroom and at a local and national level; for example, visiting performers, field trips and participation in national arts events.
- Consider collaborating with nonprofit arts organizations in school design and governance.

Professional Development and Support for Educators

Charter schools across the country employ more than [219,000](#) educators. [Twenty-nine states](#) require all charter school teachers to be certified — including **Idaho** and **Kentucky**, which have certification [requirements](#) specific to arts education. The benefits of arts education also extend to [educators](#). Arts-integration methods can help educators build confidence in their lesson planning and support their perceptions of their abilities to meet the needs of diverse learners. The flexibilities of charter schools can also support educator recruitment, staff size, educator collaboration and department focus. Charter schools can structure professional development opportunities to best meet the specific needs of educators, students and the whole school.

Recruitment

While arts-themed and arts-integrated charter schools may not require educators or staff to have educational or professional experience in the arts, interest and engagement in the arts is common among staff. Educators may be recruited or interested in teaching at a school based on their professional or personal background or interest in the arts; such as at Sallie B. Howard School of Arts and Science, where many educators with arts training share in these connections to the arts. Young Audiences Charter School does not require educators to have an arts background, but their willingness to collaborate to implement an arts-integrated curriculum is critical to their role.

Collaboration

[Studies](#) show that the integration of the arts into lesson plans and the participation in arts education professional development opportunities can help educators improve their instructional skills and professional competencies. Charter schools have the flexibility to structure teams of educators in unique ways. For instance, ArtSpace Charter School has [a team that](#) focuses on arts integration, which includes educators who teach specific arts disciplines.

At Young Audiences Charter School, classroom teachers and teaching artists (who work in specific grade levels) co-teach arts-integrated units, and the school requires educators to dedicate at least one day a week to arts integration co-planning. The school's planning structure supports planning between teachers and teaching artists and allows for common planning across grade level teams.

“The partnership between Young Audiences Charter School Association and Young Audiences of Louisiana exists to fulfill the mission to educate the whole child through arts integration and equip our creative learners to flourish as leaders in life and learning. We focus much of our efforts on creating a collaborative work environment for both our teachers and teaching artists. Through their collaborations, we've developed a rigorous and diverse academic culture that is strategically built around the arts.

— **BRANDON HOUSE**

School Leader, Young Audiences Charter School

Professional Development

Approaches to professional development opportunities for educators and staff vary among schools. City Neighbors Charter School provides professional development in arts integration for its educators through a partnership with Arts Every Day and offers opportunities for them to work with the school's two arts-integration coaches to plan lessons. Within the school's class schedule, students participate in arts-focused blocks and a project arts block, during which general education teachers and visual arts educators co-plan, co-teach and work to ensure that each academic subject is equal in experience and value.

Educators who teach non-arts subjects at the Sallie B. Howard School for the Arts and Education participate in monthly dance, music, theatre and visual arts trainings. The school also offers Immersion Sessions, during which arts specialists train educators in fundamental elements of their areas of expertise, and they collaborate to identify connections to other core subjects. Arts specialists also assist in the design and facilitation of arts-integrated lessons.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND SUPPORT FOR EDUCATORS

- Design schedules that allow for weekly co-planning time between educators who teach non-arts courses and arts educators or teaching artists to integrate the arts into other academic subjects. (If delivering an arts-integrated curriculum.)
- Use community partnerships to provide immersive professional development opportunities for arts educators to help improve arts-based practices.
- Use community partnerships to provide immersive professional development opportunities for educators who teach non-arts courses, including training with teaching artists, to support learning through the arts.
- Consider team structures that foster collaboration across the arts and other academic subjects, and provide opportunities to maximize resources and time.

As charter school leaders design and implement curricula, programming and staff supports, the considerations included in this report can be broadly applied in charter schools, as well as traditional public schools, across the country.



About the Author



As project manager, Cassandra contributes to reports and publications for the Arts Education Partnership and provides support for AEP convenings. Prior to this position, she worked as a communications specialist at Education Commission of the States and AEP. With an educational background in art history and a strong belief in the transformational qualities of learning, Cassandra is passionate about her work and dedicated to sharing research and resources on the arts in education with stakeholders across the country. Contact Cassandra at cquillen@ecs.org or **303.299.3631**.

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- | [Bridges Public Charter School](#)
- | [City Neighbors Charter School](#)
- | [The Sallie B. Howard School for the Arts and Education](#)
- | [Young Audiences Charter School](#)

