

FROM DATA TO ACTION

CA Applies Collective Impact Approach to Track Arts Education and Drive Improvement

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"Know your data. Use your data. Change your data." This is the mantra behind a burgeoning movement in California to broaden access to arts instruction in public schools. Using data as the spark for action, a diverse coalition of educators, parents, funders, government agencies and arts organizations are supporting schools and districts to identify gaps and advance solutions.

Tulare County, located in the heart of California's Central Valley, is one of the many places across the state where this movement is having an impact. Armed with new, user-friendly data dashboards highlighting inequities in arts access across the county's 43 school districts, the county office of education convened superintendents and principals in January 2017 to encourage them to take a hard look at their data and develop plans for improvement.

"The dashboards have given us the visuals and the impetus for bringing people together to do something," said Kate Stover, staff development and curriculum specialist for visual and performing arts with the Tulare County Office of Education. "Now we can easily show people what is and isn't happening and compare it to what the law says schools should be offering. There is new accountability — and a new commitment to doing better by our students."

A Series of Case Studies in Arts Education Data

This is one in a series of three case studies that describe how state and community leaders have come together to ensure that families, educators and policymakers have better information about students' opportunities in arts education. Read the other case studies:

- [Getting to 100 Percent: How NJ Used Data-Driven Strategies to Achieve Universal Access to Arts Education.](#)
- [Mapping the Arts: TX Uses Data to Spotlight Disparities and Drive Equal Access to Arts Education.](#)

These case studies are a product of the [State Data Infrastructure Project for Arts Education](#), a collaboration between the National Endowment for the Arts and Education Commission of the States to create tools and provide technical assistance that help states extract, analyze and report on data about arts education. Other SDIP publications include:

- [Using State Data Systems to Report Information on Arts Education.](#)
- [50-State Comparison: Arts Education Data Collection and Reporting.](#)
- [The State Education Data Toolkit.](#)

These reports, tools and stories aim to empower decision-makers with the information they need to ensure that every American student has the opportunity to excel in and through the arts.

A Collective Impact Approach

It is a commitment shared by a growing number of people and organizations across a state where 1 in 10 jobs are in the creative industries. A major spark for the movement was the 2014 launch of the statewide arts education coalition, Create CA, which emerged from strategic conversations supported by the National Endowment for the Arts. Create CA unites five statewide partner organizations representing parents, teachers, state government, school superintendents and other stakeholders. (They are the California County Superintendents Educational Services Association, California Arts Council, California Alliance for Arts Education, California State PTA and California Department of Education.) From the start, the partners embraced the core principles of the [collective impact model](#) of social change. The Arts Endowment continues to support these efforts through its [Collective Impact Grants Program](#), which has fueled broader adoption of the model — including an emphasis on collecting and disseminating better data — across the country.

“We knew that if we didn’t have good data, then everything was anecdotal and people could say they were offering broad-based arts programs when that wasn’t necessarily true,” said Create CA Program Director Pat Wayne.

Initially, Create CA faced some resistance to the idea of using data to paint a clearer picture of arts access across the state. “People fundamentally knew that the arts were underrepresented in school curricula,” recalled Jack Mitchell, who oversees visual and performing arts at the secondary level for the California Department of Education. “At the same time, they were nervous about what the data would show about the extent of the problem.”

Over a period of months, however, Create CA and its statewide partners made a case to school superintendents and other key audiences about the need for data — and in 2016, the state launched a new effort aimed at tracking where (and how) arts education is offered across the state. From the start, the California Arts Education Data Project set out to provide school-level, district, county and statewide data on arts access, as well as tools to help parents, educators and others promote broader arts access for students.

California was part of an initial cohort of four states to work with the national Arts Education Data Project, which is spearheaded by Quadrant Research in partnership with the State Education Agency Directors of Arts Education. (Quadrant is the firm that helped lead the state of New Jersey’s pioneering data work.) Working with the Quadrant team, including founder and CEO Robert B. Morrison, California began using data that schools were already reporting to the state department of education to track student enrollment in arts courses in middle and high schools across the state. (Subject-level data are not collected at the elementary level in California.)

“One of the best things about this partnership is that we didn’t have to be the data experts, and we didn’t have to go out and create a better mousetrap,” said Wayne. “Quadrant was already doing this work, and they knew how to access the state data and turn it into something user-friendly.”

In late 2016, the California Arts Education Data Project released its first statewide report, based on data from the 2013-14 and 2014-15 school years for grades 6-12. Among the key findings: Thirty-eight percent of California students were enrolled in at least one arts class, with enrollment varying widely by arts discipline. Seventeen percent of students were enrolled in art; 14 percent in music; 5 percent in arts, media

and entertainment; 4 percent in theater; and 2 percent in dance.

Mitchell, a one-time theater teacher, said he suspected there would be disparity across the disciplines, but he was surprised at the dearth of programs in theater and dance. “When you really look at it, these are the least expensive forms of arts education and yet they aren’t being offered,” he said. He also noted that the data showed inequities in arts access. The higher the percentage of students on free and reduced lunch at a school, the lower the arts participation rate. Similarly, students in rural schools were enrolled at markedly lower rates than their peers in urban schools.

Dashboards and Data Walks

The California Arts Education Data Project produced user-friendly, interactive dashboards that enabled people to review the data by school, district, county or statewide. Create CA agreed to host the data and dashboards on its website instead of having the state government post it. According to Wayne, this decision was based on the coalition partners’ desire to make sure the data would always be accessible, regardless of leadership and personnel changes in state government.

The partners in Create CA were not content simply to release the data and dashboards and wait for people to do something. To help ensure that the data would drive action at all levels to improve arts access, Create CA organized a statewide communications and outreach campaign. The coalition prepared road maps for districts on how to evaluate their data, and it produced webinars for various audiences on the data. One webinar was specifically targeted at school superintendents and their arts coordinators, while another webinar targeted parents, teachers and community arts champions. The coalition also

published a Communications and Action Toolkit to support stakeholders to spread the word.

Wayne said that Create CA’s collective impact approach helped ensure that the data project’s findings would have broad reach and get noticed. “Because we were already in partnership and because these groups all have real sway among their constituencies, it made so much sense for all of the partners to jump in and elevate the data,” she said.

Create CA also offered to bring state partners to county offices around the state for data walks designed to support local officials, educators and others to analyze the data for their communities and develop plans for addressing gaps. “The idea was to highlight the inequities in the data and promote the idea of strategic planning,” said Wayne. The California Alliance for Arts Education even offered coaching on arts planning for counties or districts at a minimal price, based on a participatory approach called the Insider’s Guide to Arts Education Planning.

Wayne said supporting planning at the county level has been a “game changer.” “We want to position counties to be able to do this work themselves,” she said.

In late 2016, the Burton School District became the first in Tulare County to create an arts plan. Supported by the California Alliance for Arts Education, elementary school mentor teacher Hector Marquez convened a planning team of parents, students, teachers and other community members to develop the district’s first plan. One result of the plan was the hiring of the district’s first full-time arts coordinator, Daniella Lovato.

Lovato, a former first-grade teacher who stepped into her new role in 2018, said her initial focus has been surveying what every school in the district offers in terms of arts programming, facilities, after-school activities and more. In a district where the overwhelming majority of

students are Latino and where more than 4 in 10 students come from low-income households, Lovato said school and district leaders are focused squarely on issues of equity.

“We want to move to more equitable access to the arts, and we need to start by learning more about what is available to students across the district,” Lovato said. She also is planning parent and student surveys to assess what people want to see in their schools.

A Spark for Action

Create CA’s arts education data efforts have fueled coordinated action across the state. In addition to working directly with counties and districts, the partners in Create CA are actively engaged in disseminating the data among their constituencies. The California State PTA, for example, uses the data from the project as a centerpiece of its annual legislative conference in Sacramento, which brings parent leaders from across the state to the capital to meet with their senators and representatives.

The new data also has been a spark for a number of statewide efforts to address inequities in arts access. For example, the California County Superintendents Educational Services Association teams up with the state department of education to convene representatives of rural counties across the state to strategize together about how to address the urban-rural gap in arts access. To date, 13 rural counties are engaged in quarterly meetings and receiving coaching support to develop their own strategic arts plans.

Similarly, the California Alliance for Arts Education launched an effort to help districts address gaps in arts access for students in low-income communities. The Alliance’s Title I Initiative is aimed at helping school leaders

understand how funds authorized under Title I of the Every Student Succeeds Act can support arts strategies for meeting student achievement goals in schools serving large numbers of students on free and reduced-price meals.

Local Data Work

Even before Create CA’s collective efforts began, local school districts across the state showed a powerful appetite for using data to drive expanded student access to the arts. The Chula Vista Elementary School District outside San Diego is the largest K-6 school district in the state, with 46 school sites and more than 30,000 students. In 2015, the district adopted a visual and performing arts strategic plan based on data showing the benefits of the San Diego Youth Symphony’s after-school music education programs on attendance, student test scores and parental involvement in schools. Fortuitously, the plan came out around the same time that California implemented a new funding formula for education that brought more resources to schools and districts serving large numbers of students from low-income families.

With \$5 million in new resources for teacher salaries, the Chula Vista district was able to hire 90 new visual and performing arts teachers to advance the goals of the strategic arts plan. “Having good data in hand meant we were ready to make a case for those positions,” said Lauren Shelton, visual and performing arts coordinator for the district.

Similarly, when former middle school band director Greg Solomon was hired as visual and performing arts coordinator for the Moreno Valley Unified School District during the 2014-15 school year, he launched a needs assessment to determine enrollment in arts classes among the 33,000 students in the district east of Los Angeles. The data showed that 2 of the 4 high

schools in the district had no choir or dance program; one high school didn't even have a piano on campus.

Solomon subsequently began work with district and school officials on an arts plan. Among the initial goals is to get the district's middle and high schools to commit to having choir, band, theater and dance programs. The district also has been working to bring more specialized arts instruction to elementary school students. Recently, the district started construction of a new \$25 million performing arts center that all schools will be able to use.

"We haven't reached all of our goals, but we are making real progress," Solomon said.

Next Steps

Since the initial data release in 2016, the California Arts Education Data Project has followed up with new statewide reporting every year. The latest release, in September 2019, showed a slight improvement in overall student participation in the arts over the previous four years, from 37 percent to 39 percent. In addition, the number of students with no access to any arts instruction declined by 25 percent, and the number of arts educators grew by 5 percent.

But the data continue to reveal major gaps. For example, only 26 percent of California students had access to all four arts disciplines as required by state law in the 2018-19 school year. And, participation in the arts remained significantly lower in rural and low-income communities.

Wayne of Create CA said she still hears concern from partners and others about how the data paint a disheartening and unflattering picture of arts access in the state with the highest number of public school students in the

nation. But she says the data put welcome, competitive pressure on state lawmakers and education leaders. "They don't like to see California rank low on any list," she said. What's more, Create CA is committed to using the data to drive positive change.

"We want people to come together and look at the data and ask why things are the way they are," Wayne said. "If your school or district is below the average for the state, or if you are not offering all disciplines, then why?"

"Data tells a story," echoed Sherry Griffith, executive director of the California PTA.

"Having good, reliable data gives stakeholders the tools to go before the school board and the community and speak intelligently about the need for an arts plan and other actions."

As part of its latest data release, the California Arts Education Data Project created new online dashboards that allow people to review trends in arts access over the past five years. The dashboards also break out enrollment in the arts based on the percentage of students receiving free and reduced-price lunch, among other factors. The coalition partners still do not include elementary school enrollment data because they do not have to be reported to the state. That said, the California Alliance for Arts Education is supporting efforts to require elementary school reporting.

The collective impact partners in Create CA understand that their state has work to do to expand access to quality arts programs. "I don't think any of us feel like we can go out and brag to other states. The data's not strong enough and we are not there yet," said Griffith. But the partners feel they are making great progress in making arts education a priority in California. As Griffith puts it, "We just need to keep hitting home the message that people should be using their data to drive change."

Examples of State Data Dashboards

CALIFORNIA: Explore the California Arts Education Data Project [interactive dashboards](#).

NEW JERSEY: Explore the [Interactive School Performance Dashboard](#) for New Jersey.

TEXAS: Explore the Art Can [State of the Arts Map](#).

About the Author

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William H. Woodwell Jr. is a writer, editor and author who works with a range of organizations to share powerful stories of impact on key issues facing communities and the world. From interviewing and research to framing and content development, Bill helps clients drive awareness and action on topics from education and equity to climate change. More info at www.whwoodwell.com.

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