

# GETTING TO 100 PERCENT

## How NJ Used Data-Driven Strategies to Achieve Universal Access to Arts Education

William H. Woodwell Jr.

The dance studio at Paramus High School is a hub of activity all week — and often on weekends too. Students at the northern New Jersey school have the opportunity to take four levels of dance, led by certified dance instructor Claudine Ranieri. There is a 30-student-strong school dance troupe, the Paramus Spartanettes, that performs regularly in the community. The school has dance programs for special needs populations, as well as middle school and preschool students. And, students regularly take field trips to New York City for master dance classes with the Rockettes, Broadway choreographers and the Alvin Ailey Dance Program.

Paramus High School's robust dance program sprang from a multiyear effort to strengthen its arts education programming that started when the school received a so-so report card on its arts education offerings. The report card was part of a 2007 statewide census report on the status and condition of arts education in New Jersey's public schools.

"That report was a real wake-up call for us," said Lisa Vartanian, supervisor of visual and performing arts with the Paramus Public School District. "It really highlighted a number of issues that needed our immediate attention." Among the biggest gaps raised by the survey: Students at Paramus High School lacked opportunities to learn dance.

### 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:

- [From Data to Action: CA Applies Collective Impact Approach to Track Arts Education and Drive Improvement.](#)
- [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 Baseline Survey

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The 2007 survey report was issued by the New Jersey Arts Education Partnership, renamed Arts Ed NJ. It was based on survey data from 98 percent of public schools across the state on student enrollment in arts classes during the 2005-06 school year. Champions of the arts in the state went on to combine survey (or census) data with administrative data that schools already report to the New Jersey Department of Education — via the state’s student-level, longitudinal data system (SLDS) — to measure student access to the arts and drive ongoing improvement.

“What we wanted to do was effectively use data from existing student-level submissions so we could see how many students had access to arts classes as required by the state,” said Bari Erlichson, a former assistant commissioner for the New Jersey Department of Education’s division on data and evaluation. Under New Jersey’s Core Curriculum Content Standards, Erlichson pointed out, districts must provide learning opportunities in four arts content areas — dance, music, theater and visual art. (The state recently added media arts.) To graduate from high school, students need five credits (one year) of arts instruction.

The 2007 survey showed Paramus High School was not the only school to fall short of the state requirements by offering a limited menu of arts education opportunities. Overall, the survey found that 94 percent of New Jersey students had access to some arts education in their schools. But that access was uneven. For example, most schools (including 9 out of 10 elementary schools and 2 out of 3 middle and high schools)

offered only 2 of the 4 arts disciplines to students (usually music and visual arts). And, the survey found that 75,000 students in the state attended school every day with no access to arts instruction.

The survey report included recommendations for state government, educators and others. It also sparked a multiyear, statewide campaign to strengthen access to arts education for all students.

“This was a clear case of needing to know where you are in order to get where you want to go,” said Robert B. Morrison, founder of Quadrant Research, which led the research effort in close partnership with the New Jersey Department of Education and others. “If we believe that every child has a right to strong arts programs in their schools, then we have to know where we are in terms of making that happen in a given year, and we need to keep checking our progress.”

## ‘Within Our Power’

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New Jersey began advancing arts education through better data in 2004. That’s when a diverse group of public and private partners formed the New Jersey Arts Education Census Project.<sup>1</sup> Building on an earlier mapping project launched in the 1990s by the New Jersey State Council on the Arts and Playwrights Theatre of New Jersey, the census project [aimed](#) to “gather, evaluate and disseminate qualitative and quantitative data regarding arts education in the state of New Jersey.”

In April 2006, the state department of education distributed the [New Jersey Visual and Performing Arts Survey](#) to all 2,408

schools in the state. Two surveys went out: one for schools that include grades K-6 and one for those serving students in grades 7-12. Both surveys included qualitative measures that examine arts education policies and instruction, as well as quantitative measures of student participation, enrollment, teachers and certification.

Vartanian of the Paramus Public School District found the process of completing the survey enlightening. “As a new administrator, the survey helped me realize where our strengths and weaknesses were when it came to arts education,” she said. “The survey enabled me to dig deeper, to sit with principals and central office administration within the district, and have meaningful and honest discussions about our programs and how we could improve them.”

More than 98 percent of New Jersey schools and 100 percent of the state’s school districts completed the online survey. Dale Schmid, visual and performing arts coordinator with the New Jersey Department of Education, credits dogged follow-up by Quadrant Research and the New Jersey State Council on the Arts for the strong response rate. “They literally spent months chasing people down and riding herd on districts to complete the survey,” Schmid said. “Given our focus on access and equity, we wanted to make sure we were capturing data that provided a complete picture of what was happening across the state.”

The census project compiled the data and issued the 2007 report, [Within Our Power: The Progress, Plight and Promise of Arts Education for Every Child](#). The report introduction sums up the project’s findings: “The promise of arts education for

all our students remains elusive, with many educational expectations going unmet.” Among the recommendations in the report were that the state department of education create a state accountability system to track student access to arts education and levels of participation across schools and districts.

Arts Ed NJ, which included many of the same partners as the census project, pushed to move forward with the report’s recommendations. The partnership was seen from the start as a clearinghouse for information and data on arts education in the state, as well as a source of guidance for schools and districts seeking to expand access and improve the quality of arts programming.

Schmid said the partnership helped solve the problem that New Jersey had no centralized structure for rallying schools, parents and state leaders to support arts education. “There was a lot of good work happening in places across the state, but it was isolated,” he said. “We needed to develop more of a collective voice. We needed a place where we could all come together and bring our different authorities and perspectives and talents to the table.”

One reason the partnership started so successfully, according to Wendy Liscow of the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation, was that it intentionally convened arts organizations and arts educators, along with state agencies and other partners. “There is an odd thing that happens when it comes to supporting the arts: Arts educators and arts organizations don’t always collaborate,” said Liscow, the foundation’s education program director, who is a former administrator, director and producer with nonprofit

theaters. “This was really a case of leaving no sector behind and getting everyone on the same page about what needed to happen.”

## From Data to Action

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In the years following the initial census, Arts Ed NJ moved to the forefront in promoting expanded access to arts programming in schools statewide. Among its signature achievements: working with the state to strengthen New Jersey’s Core Curriculum Content Standards for the visual and performing arts, the document that guides development of local arts curricula.

The partnership also led efforts to identify and recognize [Model Schools in the Arts](#). Based on data from the 2007 census report, as well as interviews with district officials, educators and students, the partnership honored schools that scored in the top tier in offering broad-based access to arts classes, including all four arts disciplines. The model schools program includes an annual recognition event plus opportunities for selected schools to host tours and mentor colleagues at other schools.

Throughout, gathering data and disseminating research remained a top priority for the partnership. In 2011, it conducted a statewide survey following up on its earlier research. As in 2006, the survey was distributed by the New Jersey Department of Education to all schools in the state. The resulting 2012 report, [Keeping the Promise: Arts Education for Every Child: The Distance Traveled - The Journey Remaining](#), noted that efforts to expand students’ access to arts education in New Jersey were paying off, despite the effects of the Great Recession

of 2007-2009 on school funding levels across the state.

In all, the 2012 report showed that 97 percent of New Jersey students had access to classes in at least one arts discipline. With more schools offering daily arts classes, the number of students attending schools without any access to the arts had declined by 54,000 since 2006. In addition, the percentage of schools adopting the Core Curriculum Content Standards for the visual and performing arts grew from 81 percent to 97 percent. Equally important, more than 90 percent of schools were using certified arts specialists as the primary providers of music and visual arts instruction.

Despite good news in the 2012 report, the survey showed ample room for continued improvement. For example, a majority of schools still were not offering instruction in all four arts disciplines, and per-pupil spending for arts instruction had declined by 30 percent in elementary schools and 44 percent in high schools.

## New Data Dashboards

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The 2012 report contained new recommendations that provided a blueprint for the partnership’s work in subsequent years. Acting on those recommendations, Arts Ed NJ worked with the New Jersey State Department of Education to include arts education measures as part of the school performance reports for every school. The department had been working for several years to respond to federal mandates to build its SLDS, known as NJSMART. As part of that effort, the state began to collect course- or

class-level data organized by the National Center for Education Statistics' School Codes for the Exchange of Data. These collections made it possible to determine precise participation rates in each arts class in every school in the state. The measures built on the earlier census data to provide a clearer picture of what was happening in individual schools. When these measures came out in 2014, New Jersey was the first state in the nation to publicly report this data.

In 2014 and 2015, Arts Ed NJ released a series of [interactive dashboards](#) that allow citizens to review and compare arts education information for every school in the state. Based on the school performance reports, the dashboards allow citizens to interact with data on student enrollment and participation levels for each of the four arts disciplines. The data can be viewed by school, district, county or state totals. Schools and communities also can compare their results to the averages for the entire state.

“The statewide census was a real game changer, but having those dashboards — and the school level measures — has been a great tool for us,” said Allison Tratner, executive director of the New Jersey State Council on the Arts. “It gives parents, communities, teachers and school boards a real window on how they are doing; and it gives them information to make their case for more attention to the arts.”

To further efforts, Arts Ed NJ applied for funding from Americans for the Arts to implement a three-year initiative to advance state-level policies to strengthen arts education. With support from Americans for the Arts' [State Policy Pilot Program](#) and the National Endowment for the Arts,

the partnership launched a new public will campaign called Arts Ed Now. Its goal is to foster statewide support for arts education by providing public information about the status and benefits of arts education in New Jersey. The Arts Endowment funds this work through its [Collect Impact Grants Program](#), which aligns with the [collective impact](#) model of social change across the country, including an emphasis on collecting and disseminating better data.

Across New Jersey, parents, teachers and others have been using the data collected by the partnership to protect and strengthen student access to arts education. In 2018, for example, Arts Ed NJ worked closely with arts educators in Trenton to thwart threatened cuts in arts programming. After seeing a presentation based on the partnership's school- and district-level data, the local school board decided not only to forgo any cuts but also to increase arts staffing for the following year.

Similarly, local arts champions in the coastal city of Pleasantville, which had suffered years of disinvestment in arts education, partnered with Arts Ed NJ to develop a data-driven strategy that compelled the district to implement a full districtwide arts program.

Simultaneous with important local wins, Arts Ed NJ has continued to work for statewide victories. Among these was a law signed by the governor in 2016 to require schools to weight courses in the visual and performing arts equally with all other courses in calculating a student's GPA. The 2007 census had shown that more than 20 percent of high schools reported unequal grade weighting.

## 100 Percent Access

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Paramus High School's evolution toward greater student access to dance and other arts programming is emblematic of the positive changes underway across the state. In 2012, just five years after its initial so-so report card, the school was 1 of 4 in the state to receive the [Model School of the Arts](#) designation from Arts Ed NJ. More recently, in September 2019, New Jersey Gov. Phil Murphy appeared at the high school for an important announcement.

Based on administrative data reported to the state department of education for the 2017-18 school year, the governor announced that New Jersey had become the first state in the nation where all public school students attended schools that offered at least one arts class.<sup>2</sup> The data showed that 250,000 more students were participating in arts education every year, compared to a decade earlier. "The future of New Jersey is bright, and today's announcement is a critical part of ensuring that our children reach their full potential," the governor stated.

For the partners in Arts Ed NJ, the governor's announcement was a moment to celebrate the fruits of 15 years of data-driven work to expand access to arts education for children. But it was also a time to reflect on what's next. As the 2019 report showed, schools still struggled to offer a diversity of arts programming across all disciplines, and there were still important gaps. For example, the data showed that although all students had access to at least one arts course, student participation in arts education was lower in

schools with higher numbers of students who are eligible for free and reduced-price lunch, an indicator of higher levels of poverty. In addition, schools where the majority of students were black had lower participation rates. Arts Ed NJ continues to plan special arts education census efforts to supplement state education data and focus attention on remaining challenges.

"It took us more than a decade to get to where we are and to be able to say that all students now have access to the arts," said Tratner of the New Jersey State Council on the Arts. "Now we can turn our attention to what equity really looks like across schools and districts and to strengthening the quality of these programs."

That's exactly what's happening in Newark, where the partners in the Newark Arts Education Roundtable (rechristened Arts Ed Newark in 2019) are combining statewide data with their own student survey data to paint a fuller picture of the positive impacts of arts education on everything from attendance to students' social and emotional growth. "Measuring arts access is important, but we're also trying to go the next step and show both where the gaps are and why it's so important to keep working to improve the quality of these programs for all students," said Lauren Meehan, director of Arts Ed Newark, which receives funding from the Arts Endowment's Collective Impact Grants Program to build the community's collective capacity to deliver arts education.

Whether in Newark or in other cities and towns across the state, New Jersey's efforts to capture and disseminate data to drive



sustained improvement in arts education will continue, according to Quadrant Research’s Morrison. “We have created a culture driven by a combination of data, reflection and action; and I am confident the culture we’ve created will continue to deliver great results for students and for all of New Jersey.”

## 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](#).

## ENDNOTES

1. Music for All Foundation, New Jersey State Council on the Arts, New Jersey Department of Education, the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation and Playwrights Theatre of New Jersey. Additional support was provided by NAMM, the International Music Products Association, the D’Addario Foundation for the Performing Arts and David Bryan of Bon Jovi.

2. The data on arts access for 2017-18 came from a combination of data submitted through New Jersey’s SLDS: the New Jersey School Performance Reports, the Certificated Teacher File and the Course Enrollment File. These files were combined and analyzed to determine the presence of an arts discipline, teacher assignments and student course enrollment. These data were then compared to prior reporting from the New Jersey Arts Education Census Projects. Arts Ed NJ has continued to pursue arts education census efforts to supplement the state data with information the state does not collect — releasing a third census report in 2017 and planning a fourth for 2020-21.

# 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](http://www.whwoodwell.com).

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