

TESTIMONY TO CITY COUNCIL COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION

Monday, December 6, 2021

Testimony to City Council Committee on Education

By Dance/NYC

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On behalf of Dance/NYC (www.dance.nyc), a service organization that serves over 5,000 individual dance artists, 1,200 dance-making entities, and 500 non-profit dance companies and the many for profit dance businesses based in the metropolitan New York City area, including BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and Peoples of Color) dance workers, immigrants, and disabled dance workers. Dance/NYC embeds the values of justice, equity, and inclusion into all aspects of its operations and frames the following requests through the lens of those values. Dance/NYC joins colleague advocates working across creative disciplines in thanking you for your leadership and requesting:

1. The instatement of the arts as a core subject in New York City schools;
2. To prioritize funding for the Office of Arts & Special Projects Strategic Arts Plan to secure equitable access to high-quality universal arts education; and
3. To adequately and sustainably fund arts education services, which directly supports partnerships and after school programs through the Department of Cultural Affairs and Department of Youth & Community Development.

New York is one of only 19 states that do not require the arts as a core subject for public school students, despite the fact that 91% of Americans believe the arts are a vital part of a well-rounded education (<https://bit.ly/IPSOSArtEducationSurvey>). State and federal initiatives to support requirements for arts in education are gaining momentum to strengthen investments in arts instruction beyond recommendations to individual districts and school principals. As the largest school system in the nation, New York City schools have the opportunity to lead the way by making the arts—including dance, media arts, music, theatre, and visual arts—a core subject in all City schools. Students are recovering from the impacts of the pandemic on their learning, and arts education is a key component in strengthening student well-being and overall academic achievement and must continue through every student's future education. Even as arts instruction continued throughout the pandemic, budget cuts have limited schools' capacity to deliver equitable, quality arts education and devastated partnerships with arts and cultural organizations, and funding must be restored and increased to recoup these losses.

The benefits of arts education are well documented and wide-ranging. According to New Victory Theater's recent report, Spark Change: Investing in performing arts education for all (<https://bit.ly/NewVictorySparkChangeReport>), performing arts education supports social and emotional well being—essential in the pandemic's climate of precarity—while fostering creativity, critical thinking, team-building skills, self-reflection, and communication to prepare future leaders to face new and persistent challenges. Arts programming fosters a welcoming, creative school environment, and arts partnerships and after school programs support students and their families to participate as engaged members of their communities. This evidence makes it abundantly clear that arts education is not a luxury—it is essential to student learning, well being, and social and civic engagement. Making the arts part of the core curriculum of New York City schools would set requirements for alignment with state standards and include a combination of in-school certified arts teachers and partnerships with arts and cultural organizations, all of which directly benefits students, educators, and arts workers.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a devastating effect on public school students and arts workers. Beginning last year, Dance/NYC conducted the Coronavirus Dance Impact Study, a comprehensive mixed-methods study, and produced an informational brief on the impact of COVID-19 on the dance sector (<https://bit.ly/COVIDImpactBrief>). Findings indicated that dance organizations, groups, and projects—many of which engage in educational partnerships and extracurricular programs for students—saw their budgets shrink by nearly one-third (31% on average) due to earned and contributed revenue losses. As a result, 18% of dance organizations, groups, and projects believe that permanent closure is likely or extremely likely; 84% of those facing permanent closure have budgets under \$100K. Small budget organizations are feeling the most acute impact of the pandemic, and challenges to organizational stability put the dance sector at risk of losing capacity to contribute to educational partnerships. The quality of dance education suffers with the reduction or loss of programming from these organizations. In school, after school, extracurricular, and field trip activities expose students to cultural experiences that can spark a lifelong interest and investment in dance and theatrical arts as a career, both on and off the stage, and cultivate future arts patrons and audiences. By encouraging participation and enjoyment of arts and cultural programming, dance education contributes to student well being in the short term and advances essential contributions to the creative economy in the long term.

Pandemic-related interruptions in programming, economic hardship, and permanent closures in the arts and culture sector have a direct impact on student access to and participation in arts programming, both in school and after school. For arts and cultural venues and institutions that provide services to arts workers and school-age students, the repercussions of organizational interruptions, displacement, and closures are compounded; losing access to these spaces puts the well being of arts workers, arts students, and the art itself at risk. Dance/NYC's Coronavirus Dance Impact Informational Brief (<https://bit.ly/COVIDImpactBrief>) shows that these impacts are felt most acutely by disabled, BIPOC, and immigrant arts workers who come from communities with less access to generational wealth, which in turn stands to exacerbate historical inequities in the field. Fewer arts workers and arts organizations in the City directly results in losses to cultural diversity and essential educational opportunities. Arts education programming provides a pipeline for students into creative careers and audience engagement, which relies on the sustained presence of arts and cultural organizations in an economic ecosystem that encompasses many other industries, including tourism, hospitality, and community services.

Additionally, arts education is an equity issue tied to racial, social, and economic justice. Gaps in student achievement along racial and socioeconomic lines are longstanding and persistent, as indicated by the New York City Independent Budget Office Schools Brief report on Tracing Changes in Achievement Gaps by Race & Gender in New York City Public Schools (<https://bit.ly/AchievementGapReport>). The National Endowment for the Arts A Decade of Arts Engagement report (<https://bit.ly/NEAArtsEngagementReport>) finds that early participation in the arts encourages children to pursue higher achievement and learning opportunities. The Center for Arts Education report Staying in School: Arts Education and New York City High School Graduation Rates (<https://bit.ly/ArtsEdAndGraduationReport>) shows that arts education drives up school attendance and graduation rates and indicates that limited access to arts education correlates to BIPOC and low-income areas—evidence of sustained disparities in an inequitable system. Equity in education as a whole cannot become a reality if quality arts learning opportunities are only available to some students. Findings from UCLA's COVID-19 and the Digital Divide in Virtual Learning report show that students of color and students from low-income backgrounds experienced acute impacts throughout the pandemic with regard to access to technology and instructional support for virtual learning to meet their individual needs (<https://bit.ly/COVIDDigitalDivideReport>). These disparities remain even as students return to the classroom. Arts education is a crucial component in the effort to resolve long standing inequities exacerbated by the pandemic.

These pressing issues must remain at the forefront of the Office of Arts & Special Projects Strategic Arts Plan, with prioritized funding to

support and execute the measures required to foster equity and justice in the arts classroom. Arts education opens diverse pathways to learning and expressions of knowledge for students with disabilities and English language learners, which provides students an outlet to recognize and express their social and cultural identities. Teachers must also be supported with investments in training and certification for arts educators, with a particular focus on engaging BIPOC teachers through such programs as the OASP's pilot program for supplementary certification for existing elementary Common Branch cluster teachers to earn their arts content certification. By providing universal access to arts education and championing equity in its planning and execution, the City sends the message that the arts are a viable pathway to success for all students, which supports the cultural diversity of the arts workforce and the economic health of the City's creative industry. The benefits of arts education are evident in the experiences of today's arts leaders, including Eduardo Vilario, Artistic Director of Ballet Hispánico and Dance/NYC board member, who says of his experience growing up in the Bronx: "Arts education is synonymous with community activism. Without arts educators, I would have been another statistic as a young Latinx child growing up in a tough neighborhood. The arts, in particular dance, saved me. The arts fill a void in communities forgotten, artists go into spaces others fear, and in that bravery, offer safety, possibility and transformation."

The arts must remain central to a well-rounded education and be fully funded to support the well being of school communities. According to the 2019-20 Arts in Schools Report raw data, 67% of principals noted prior to the pandemic that funding for the arts is generally insufficient, and 56% of schools that cut arts partnership programs did so in response to school budget reductions. Both in school and after school arts programming directly support students' academic achievement while also allowing students and their families to build and sustain meaningful cultural connections and activism efforts within their communities. Fostering equity in the arts begins in the classroom and necessarily extends to community-based arts organizations that partner with schools and offer independent programming for students and their families. These organizations provide spaces for safety, bravery, and transformative possibility for students in historically marginalized underserved communities, in addition employing the arts workforce as teaching artists and administrators. Thus, achieving equity in the field means providing support for schools and nonprofit arts and cultural organizations that primarily serve BIPOC, immigrant, disabled, and low-income communities throughout the City. Relief funding from the American Rescue Plan Act went a long way toward providing increased access to arts education through programs like Summer Rising. This level of funding must continue beyond relief measures and increase over time to truly support the essential nature of arts education. Sustainable, long term funding for arts education partnerships and after school programs through the Department of Cultural Affairs and Department of Youth and Community Development stands to support teaching artists and arts workers in the City's arts and cultural sector.

Making the arts as a core subject in City schools, adequately funding arts programs and partnerships, and ensuring equity in the distribution of funding and programming all support the essential nature of the arts in a well-rounded education, provide much-needed relief during the pandemic, and ensure the long-term capacity of schools and arts organizations to serve public school students and their communities. Funding should prioritize schools in neighborhoods hit hardest by the pandemic that continue to struggle to meet state standards for arts education. Dance/NYC joins the City's arts and culture sector in asking for the City to ensure the value and benefits of arts education for generations to come. Arts and culture can lead the City's recovery and provide vital support to students, and these investments can help ensure their resilience, growth, and long-term survival.

For Dance/NYC and its constituents, the most urgent priorities are:

1. The instatement of the arts as a core subject in New York City schools;
2. To prioritize funding for the Office of Arts & Special Projects Strategic Arts Plan to secure equitable access to high-quality universal arts education; and
3. To adequately and sustainably fund arts education services, which directly supports partnerships and after school programs through the Department of Cultural Affairs and Department of Youth & Community Development.

The above measures stand to support arts and culture as an essential component of a well-rounded education. Dance/NYC expresses gratitude to the City Councilmembers, City Officials, Mayor's Office and other dedicated workers who have contributed to the recovery of the City's arts and culture sector and the reopening of schools. Dance/NYC thanks the Chancellor and Department of Education for their historic \$70M investment in federal stimulus funding toward arts learning. With gratitude, Dance/NYC believes that comprehensive improvements and continued investments are to be made in order for every student in the City to reap the multiple benefits of a well-rounded education that includes robust arts instruction. Dance/NYC thanks you for your consideration and commends your leadership and ongoing efforts to support students, educators, and arts workers.

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[< back](#)

[previous listing](#) • [next listing](#)