

CABINET REPORT

Trusted Source For What's News In Education

JULY 09, 2014

Arts education in schools could grow under LCFF *by Kimberly Beltran*



(Calif.) A program that brings painters, dancers, poets and other teaching artists into a number of schools across the state is likely to expand thanks to a one-time \$5 million boost to the California Arts Council's budget – a gift Gov. Jerry Brown unveiled late last month.

But even more than that, say art industry leaders, the state's new school funding system, with its accompanying educational priorities, appears to be signaling renewed and widespread interest in integrating arts education into core curriculum.

"I grew up in California public schools and arts education was part of education. There was no question about it – it was just there. That's not how it is now," said Joe Landon, executive director of the California Alliance for Arts Education – which collaborates with the state-funded CAC and three other groups on the collective goal of improving the state of arts education in California.

Landon, like many supporters of the arts as part of a well-rounded education, says school arts programming – theater, music, dance, multi-media visual – has been on a steady decline over a period of decades.

In fact, a national survey commissioned by the U.S. Department of Education found that in the decade between 2000-01 and 2009-10 "there have not been significant national declines in the availability of music and visual arts instruction in elementary and secondary schools" but that the number of elementary schools offering theater and dance dropped from 20 percent to 4 and 3 percent, respectively.

In addition, according to the survey, at more than 40 percent of secondary schools, coursework in arts was not required for graduation in the 2009-10 school year.

While there appears to be no definitive data on the comparative status of arts education, there is no lack of research suggesting that exposure to these programs may actually stimulate academic growth in other areas.

That's the belief the CAC and the Alliance for Arts Education operate under, and it was a major point of discussion as the state's Local Control Funding Formula was being crafted in the Legislature.

As part of the LCFF, school districts must create detailed Local Control Accountability Plans that reveal how they are using state funding to meet eight statewide educational goals – among them “Conditions of Learning,” which calls for all students to have access to a broad range of courses including visual and performing arts, health, physical education, career and technical education and others, regardless of what school students attend or where they live.

“It appears that with the LCFF there is an increasing recognition that things need to shift – that the priorities that districts value need to encompass more of what really determines student success and that the arts are increasingly playing an important role in that conversation.”

The California Arts Council's Artists in Schools program, despite some dramatic budget ups and downs, has managed to survive for 20 years and, in some cases, could very well be the only exposure to arts education that some students get.

Grants from the CAC to local art groups partnered with school districts bring teaching artists into K-12 classrooms to deliver “comprehensive, California standards-based arts education that underscores the critical role the arts play in the students' development of creativity, overall well-being and academic achievement,” according to the program website.

The Cultural Council of Santa Cruz will use its Artists in Schools funding to work with students at Amesti Elementary, a school with 80 percent English language learners to increase student language and academic competency. CCSC uses its “Fresh Paint” program, a visual and performance based literacy program that uses classic works of art as inspiration for original narrative writing, combining visual and theatre arts with writing and reading comprehension skills aligned to the new Common Core standards.

In the state's northern reaches, the Humboldt Arts Council will place trained, experienced poet teachers in Humboldt County schools to work with students from grades K to 12 in hands-on, sequential training in poetry writing, reading, recitation and publishing. These residencies will follow and exceed the age-appropriate California Visual and Performing Arts Content and English-Language Arts Content Standards, according to the HAC grant application.

And in Oakland, a non-profit dedicated to disrupting the negative impacts of incarceration or violence integrates standards-based visual arts instruction into a restorative justice class at MetWest High School. During the 32-week residency, students develop aesthetic perception and valuing by studying public art, symbolism, and art as a platform for social change.

“Our work is guided by the principles of restorative justice and a belief in the power of the arts to educate and heal,” the Community Work West website reads.

A key priority in determining grant winners, according to CAC executive director Craig Watson, is that the organizations must demonstrate that the artists they've chosen are top-quality in their own art form. On top of that, they need to know how to reach an audience of students.

"It's a pretty unique artist who not only is a high quality artist – they have to prove themselves as a working artist – and secondarily, they have to, obviously, be good with kids," Watson said. "It's a unique person who can do that so we work very hard with our nonprofits to make sure they've identified the people who have those combined qualities."

With an annual general fund budget of just \$1 million the last several years, the CAC now has an additional \$5 million for 2014-15 and is looking forward to being able to expand not only the Artists in Schools program but several other initiatives as well, said Watson.

Although the organization's board will make the final spending decisions later this year, consideration is likely to be given also to CAC's Poetry Out Loud, Arts-in-Corrections, Creativity at the Core and Turnaround Arts CA.

CAC, said Watson, also supports and hopes to grow the statewide Teaching Artists Support Collaborative – an attempt to organize and professionalize the ranks of the teaching artists.

As revenues rise and school budgets return to pre-recession levels, it's important to keep arts education at the forefront of student outcome discussions, says the Alliance for Arts' Landon.

"We're excited with the direction things are going and we're excited to be bringing the evidence of the ways in which the arts can impact student learning, and the kinds of ways in which the arts deliver the very things that make a difference in terms of the priorities of LCFF," Landon said. "I think there are promising indications but we have a long way to go, really."