

LAUSD decision ushers in new source of funding for arts education

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Los Angeles Unified 6th-grader Jack Spiewak performs as Macbeth at Eagle Rock Elementary School. District schools can now use a major source of federal funds to incorporate the arts into academics.

Los Angeles Unified School District officials have cleared the way for principals to tap into a major source of funding for arts programs targeting low-income students starting this fall.

Although state and federal officials previously said national Title I dollars, allocated to help disadvantaged students improve in academics, could be used for the arts instruction, some district officials had been reluctant to move ahead. The latest decision reverses the district's long-standing practice and opens the door for Title I-funded arts instruction that helps students improve their academic performance.

"This has been a long time coming and this really is a day of rejoicing, quite frankly, in LAUSD," said Rory Pullens, the district's executive director of arts education.

A two-page memo issued Thursday from Pullens, Deputy Superintendent Ruth Perez and Karen Ryback, executive director of Federal and State Education Programs, confirms the arts as a core subject and allows schools with high percentages of low-income students to use Title I funds for the arts.

Those schools "may utilize arts as an integration strategy to improve academic achievement," the directive reads. However, Title I funds are not allowed "to fund programs whose primary objective is arts education," according to

the memo. As an example, the funds could be tapped to help students learn a character's point of view in a lesson that requires acting out a skit.

Title I funding, developed in 1965 as part of President Lyndon Johnson's war on poverty, has been used historically to increase students success in reading and math. The funds have paid for efforts like reading coaches or math tutors, supplemental software programs and professional development for teachers to improve low-performing students' test scores.

At \$14 billion a year, the Title I funds make up the federal government's largest expenditure for grades K-12. The majority of LAUSD schools receive Title I dollars.

Arts advocates have long sought to get the second-largest district in the country to shift its stance on Title I arts funding, arguing that the arts have been shown in research to boost student academic performance.

LAUSD joins just a handful of districts around the state that have committed to a district-wide Title I plan including the arts. San Diego Unified, Sacramento City Unified and Chula Vista Elementary School District are among them, according to Joe Landon, executive director of the California Alliance for Arts Education.

Landon says beyond these districts, the decision to use Title I for the arts is largely playing out on a school-by-school basis. Some principals are using Title I funds for the arts, but they're doing so largely under the radar, some fearing that state monitors will say the funds were used incorrectly.

"At each level, there are people that are afraid," Landon said. The reason: schools are accountable for how Title I dollars are spent and misuse could cause schools to lose a valuable funding source. Despite the state and federal directives on Title I allowing arts instruction in academics, school officials have been hesitant to make changes because Title I spending is monitored so closely.

Landon explained that a decision to use Title I funds for the arts is momentous for schools.

"When districts begin to move," he said, "that really changes it."

ATTENTION TURNS TO PRINCIPALS, FUNDING GATEKEEPERS

When Los Angeles Unified brought on Pullens, attracting him from a well-known arts school in Washington, D.C., he took on the task of securing Title I funding in his early months on the job. He said budgeting would be a huge challenge in increasing access to the arts for more of the district's students.

The deed now done, Pullens said: "This was clearly a very high priority of what we wanted to accomplish and we are just so thrilled that this has finally come to pass."

It'll now be up to school principals to decide how much of their Title I funding to allocate for arts instruction. Pullens said plans to train principals on the benefits of arts integration are underway.

While the Title I arts spending is not mandatory, he expects the new directive to free up significant funding for the district's arts efforts. He didn't have exact estimates, but pointed out that schools' Title I funds range anywhere from hundreds of dollars to hundreds of thousands of dollars per school.

As KPCC reported in July, only about 70 of the district's more than 500 elementary schools were on track to provide all four art forms (dance, visual arts, music and theater) for the 2014-2015 school year — a legal requirement under the California education code.

Cheryl Sattler, senior partner with the Florida-based consulting firm Ethica, has worked closely with about 100 school districts nationwide and estimates only two have used Title I funding for the arts.

“The urgency is to try to get kids to read," she said, "and if you have kids, for example, in the 10th grade who are reading at a 3rd or 4th-grade level, it's really hard to think past that, because that's the emergency.” The arts are often left out of the conversation, according to Sattler, which means they're left out of funding.

“I think the issue is that largely principals, and school improvement committees, and other folks who are worried about academic performance don't always look to the arts and they don't always know the research about how powerful arts can be,” she said.

The LAUSD directive described examples of arts integration activities that schools might consider:

- Invite community members to demonstrate or share their talents with students as a prompt for a writing assignment.
- Have students create models that display mathematical data pertaining to each planet of the solar system: distance from the sun, length of day and night, length of year, and day and night surface temperatures.
- Ask students to create a small piece of dance/movement that models their understanding of geometric concepts.
- Encourage students to explore the science of sound by utilizing rubber bands, oatmeal containers, coffee cans, balloons, etc. to construct one or more of the four families of musical instruments: strings, woodwinds, brass and percussion.
- Have students write and perform a short skit to illustrate a literary character's point of view.
- Provide a lesson on utilizing a software program to create an animated film that highlights key historical events that occurred during the Civil War (In this instance, the cost of the software program would be an appropriate Title I expenditure).