

Advocate for Arts Education: Discussion Notes

State Arts Agency/State Arts Action Network Joint Forum

NASAA Assembly 2016

September 17, 2016



The National Assembly of State Arts Agencies (NASAA) and Americans for the Arts (AFTA) collaborate to offer a joint advocacy forum at every NASAA Assembly convening. These meetings—and similar sessions held during AFTA conventions—are useful occasions for state arts agency staff and council members to meet with their staff and board counterparts from statewide arts advocacy organizations. Together, state arts agencies and the State Arts Action Network learn from one another, share ideas and consider how to strengthen cultural advocacy practices at the state level.

This year's joint forum in Grand Rapids, Michigan, focused on one particularly timely policy issue: arts education. New federal legislation (the Every Student Succeeds Act, or ESSA) gives states increased authority to decide what gets taught—and what doesn't—in public schools across America. This joint forum explored how well-informed and well-coordinated state advocacy efforts can ensure that all students receive a high quality education that includes the arts. Participants in the AFTA [State Policy Pilot Program \(SP3\)](#) also joined the discussion.

The forum was welcomed by NASAA CEO Pam Breaux and AFTA President and CEO Bob Lynch and was facilitated by Jonathan Katz.

I. Gap Analysis

The discussion began with a presentation of the findings of an [SP3 gap analysis](#) conducted by Americans for the Arts in cooperation with Barb Whitney from the University of Michigan, Flint. The analysis used interviews with state leaders to assess implementation of [existing state arts education policies](#) across all 50 states.

The study revealed [success factors](#) as well as critical [barriers to policy success](#) that coordinated advocacy efforts could help to resolve.

II. What Policy Decisions Do You Want to Influence? Who Makes Them?

Maine: Our state department of education (DOE) is gathering stakeholder input, and a proficiency based diplomas law has passed. So what does this look like in each district? **Local control** is the issue—there are lots of people making decisions at the local level, not just an arts specialist at the state DOE. In 2021, four key areas will be required for graduation (science, math, English, social studies), plus one other area (arts, career technical education or world languages). Individual districts will determine what proficiency looks like. Students must have proficiency in all areas by the end of seventh year of the new policy's implementation. Math and English language arts (ELA) are weighted, per the U.S. Department of Education.

California: Educators need our input because we provide completely different perspective than those who have been wrestling with this for a long time. First, try to

expand the state's **measurement** emphasis on ELA and math—measurement must include arts education. Second, try to be part of your **committee of practitioners**; that committee is designed to figure out how to incorporate regulations. Third, public ratings or grades for entire schools often tie back to the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, so look into whether that's the case in your state and districts.

Massachusetts: Our state seems to be on a fast track with implementation, gathering public comments through an on-line survey and focus groups (early summer through end of summer). September 26, 2016, is the due date for the draft, with a goal of implementation by end of 2016. Decision-making power is centered on the state **commissioner of education**, so our focus is to reach him. As far as we know, there is no committee of practitioners, and we're not at that table right now.

Illinois: Our state is also on a fairly fast track with ESSA. We have a committee of practitioners, but it's not active. Even finding out about the committee of practitioners was a challenge. **Standards** are the train that has the most speed with ESSA in our state. It's a hot issue, and can raise the bar on arts education in general. It's a tangible process that the state board of education has bought into, so how do we build on that? **Professional development** is one way we're tackling/thinking about it.

Arkansas: Our state completed a 20-year **strategic planning process for education** that happened just prior to ESSA being passed. So education policymakers in our state are puzzling over what to do next and what they should focus on.

Maine: We just completed an arts education census, and we'll need to keep conducting them to measure future progress. We achieved 95% participation from schools across the state. This data will drive the next iteration of arts education programming within our agency. We'll also use it to go to **districts and schools** to ask who are the "have-not" students and what we can do to strengthen them. Also, how can we address those in the middle?

Vermont and New Hampshire now have similar state policies to Maine's in that we've adopted proficiency based graduation requirements. Some of the colleges are changing their curricula to reflect more **proficiency based, student-centered learning**. This proficiency based movement connects to personalized learning and the expectations and involvement of parents. The movement is taking hold in a number of states, including Ohio. Other states have this as district level policy. It's a tremendous opportunity to think about how the arts fit in.

Arizona: Along with SP3 partners, we've been participating in our states DOE's comment period. They released a draft plan that's now open for review. We're talking through responses from Arizona Citizens for the Arts. It's a complicated political landscape to navigate. The **Superintendent of Public Instruction** is an elected position, is somewhat administrative in nature, and fulfills policy set by the board of education (as appointed by the governor), so there are conflicts over **statutory authority**. We are in the process of implementing ESSA. There will be a conference on how to implement arts education within ESSA. Our plan is still up in the air, but we're putting arts education on the table as an issue.

Alabama: The arts did not have a seat at the table initially, when the state response to ESSA was first being considered. Then we started attending **ESSA community forums** and finally secured a seat at the table. Several stakeholders supportive of the arts are now a subcommittee charged with formulating recommendations for how ESSA will be implemented. They are taking us seriously, so it was very helpful to attend the community forums.

STEM/STEAM Policy Agendas

New Jersey: We have a STEAM (science, technology, engineering, arts and math) initiative, driven by a combination of the New Jersey School Boards Association and the state DOE. Higher education has a major STEM pathways initiative that includes arts, and a coalition of state partners is coming together to drive it forward. This hasn't entered into policy yet, but our new acting commissioner is favorably inclined toward the effort. We also wanted to try to come up with some common language and criteria around STEAM and arts integration. We created an [Arts Integration User Guide](#) that includes a checklist, criteria and rationale for why schools should do this. We're getting it widely disseminated to STEAM and arts integration projects in our state.

West Virginia: We got our STEAM program going through a "back door" private/public partnership. The Benedum Foundation was interested in supporting STEAM in West Virginia. It invested funds in one community, then gave resources to a **community foundation** to make funding available in more areas. The program was transferred to the West Virginia Department of Culture and History for the next two years. It was achieved completely outside of state policy or the state department of education.

California: The inclusion of STEAM in the ESSA legislation language changed our conversation with school boards. It's very useful for arts advocates and arts educators to be able to point to that policy precedent. In addition, project based learning is a hot topic in our state.

The Common Core

Alabama: In our state there were five attempts to repeal the Common Core Standards, so it was not a useful focal point for advocating for arts education.

Minnesota: There is a new publication coming out on arts integration. It started off being about Common Core and how to align with arts standards, but will be relevant to the newer policy environment. Be on the lookout for it—it's by Amy Charlevoix.

III. Strategies for Success: Who Are Your Allies?

Maine: The Maine **Principals Association** was a huge ally in achieving a 95% participation rate with our arts education census. Now we can go back to them for further implementation support for programs and plans. We're also talking about teaching artist certification and the state department of education is pursuing a "badge" for teaching artists. The arts council is working with them to do this.

New Jersey: We brought together our **principals association**, our **school boards association** and our **school administrators association**. It's more of a cordial

relationship than a policy based relationship at this moment, but we took the opportunity at a recent statewide summit to make a deeper commitment to arts education. We'll already have the education establishment behind us when we launch a building-public-will campaign. When we were advocating for equal weight for arts courses, the principals group came in to rewrite the language, then it got pushed through. When they're on your side, they're effective in making things happen.

Massachusetts: The wife of the head of our state's **school board association** is a longtime colleague. Through her, we have secured meetings with the association president. They have been supportive of including the arts in the state's education plan.

Maryland: An asset in our state is the **first lady**. She is an arts advocate and especially an arts education advocate, and she has been sponsoring student exhibitions in the state house, etc. But her husband is fighting publicly against releasing funding to carry out education initiatives.

IV. What Are Your Chief Obstacles to Success?

Vermont: The state is mandating consolidation of school districts. Reconstituted districts will be hard-pressed at the policy, practice and administrative levels.

West Virginia: School consolidation is happening in our state, too. There are currently 55 school districts statewide, but not the population to support all of them.

NASAA: The vast majority of state legislative seats are up for reelection this November. More than 5,900 races are under way at the state level. This is a high-risk time when candidates take or avoid positions based on perceptions, not necessarily on policy rationale.

Massachusetts: We've had the highest math and literacy scores for the past few years, so there is little appetite to change the bureaucracy. The commissioner of education doesn't want to change the status quo.

NASAA: There are many unknowns related to the presidential election and the new Congress. What's the future of the department of education? How will state plans be affected by federal election outcomes? Education can be a point of contention, and we'll need to discern the opportunities or obstacles within a new White House and Congress.

Texas: There is one staff person in entire state department of education who deals with arts curriculum issues, and that one position does not carry a lot of power. It is difficult to even get a meeting with the DOE. Texas just released a new communications strategy to support arts education advocacy. It's parent-driven and will have an impact at the district level. But how to have maximum impact at the state level is still a mystery.

Minnesota: Access to more than music and visual arts is needed. We would like to see more access to more arts disciplines. Right now state law says that schools must offer at least three disciplines: dance, theatre and media arts. Minnesota has had media arts in our standards since 1990s, but we don't have teacher professional development or licensure in that area.

Florida: When we don't speak with one voice, it disenfranchises all of us. The federal legislation that separated music from arts education is deeply disturbing. Talk to your music education colleagues at the state level and let them know that we need to speak to the benefits of comprehensive arts education, not just music.

V. Advice for Maximum Impact

Multiple states: From a grass-roots point of view, would be great if Voter Voice were more affordable at the local/district level.

Arizona: One challenge we're finding is getting more people involved, so we're partnering with school community groups, parent-teacher organizations, teacher associations, etc., and working hard to build up enrollment in Voter Voice.

New Jersey: With Voter Voice, we populate for issues on a district-by-district basis. Issues flare up, then there's nothing for 10 years. We have found the SP3 process to be really valuable, and many things we've implemented we've taken from other states. We hope lessons will be shared more broadly as SP3 begins to sunset. Are there some common themes that we can agree on that cut across state boundaries? For example, access: in New Jersey we've all committed to make sure there's 100% access; then we can take it off table so we can finally focus on student engagement and participation.

Michigan: Policy change is on a longer timetable in our state, and there aren't immediate windows of influence for us to change the curriculum requirement laws. While we're waiting, however, there is a lot we can do to affect arts education practice. We've developed performance assessments in music, theatre, dance and visual arts and a bank of arts assessments for teacher evaluation. A new teacher effectiveness law was just put into place. The interpretation of that policy is happening right now, so we'll be looking at how teacher evaluation occurs and the implications for arts instruction.

New Jersey: As we talk about arts integration, we'd love to agree on what we mean by it. Some feel the arts integration movement detracts from the arts education movement. The only way this movement works is to have a full cohort of arts teachers in place.

VI. Recommended Resources & Looking Ahead

Recommended resources:

- Americans for the Arts ESSA Policy Brief: [Strengthening Arts Education](#)
- Arts Education Partnership: [ESSA: Mapping Opportunities for the Arts](#)
- Americans for the Arts: [The Arts Education Field Guide](#) and [Arts Education Navigator](#)
- Americans for the Arts: [SP3 website](#)
- [Title I Arts](#)

Regarding the future:

- It's useful to continue to share pathways to successful advocacy. Sharing and studying stories from the political action front could be useful, to find model information at the state level. Both NASAA and AFTA can help with this.

- The work of everyone in this room matters! Cross-state, cross-agency conversations are important. It's critical to keep the work moving forward, especially around arts education.
- Move the discussion beyond education departments into community and economic development.

Facilitator Jonathan Katz closed the session by encouraging the group to consider deep strategy that's not guided by any given year's legislation. Over the long term, leaders must come to believe that artistry is as important as numeracy and literacy, that the arts are essential to the practice of democracy, that the big problems we'll be facing (security, energy shortages) require creative competency, and that the arts are integral to problem solving and imagination. A forum for that kind of far-sighted conversation would be valuable.