

# National Assembly of State Arts Agencies

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## **NASAA CEO Report to Members**

**By Jonathan Katz**

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**Charleston, West Virginia**

The theme of this year's Leadership Institute has been a critical look at the future of state arts agencies. We have drawn first and foremost from our shared sense of mission, of changes in our environment, of how our agencies are currently adapting, of what we are learning, and of the challenges ahead. We have drawn also upon the perspectives and expertise of other leaders and other disciplines—of those who study state government, public opinion, leadership development, economic development, political and social movements. As professionals and volunteer leaders, we have exchanged experiences and thoughts with those who play similar roles in other states. We have devoted special attention to strengthening our skills in advocacy, media relations and problem solving. We have questioned our assumptions and probed for our big ideas. We have enjoyed and benefited from the company of our federal, regional and Canadian colleagues. Throughout, we have been inspired by the hospitality, generosity, accomplishments and amazing artistry of our Charleston and West Virginia friends.

I introduced the purpose of our gathering as strengthening our "collective efficacy," our combined ability to advance our mission of broadening, deepening and diversifying participation in the arts, and to help each other overcome adversity. Collective efficacy. I see now—and take great pride in—the capacity of our field, your capacity, for self-criticism and for imagining how to provide better and better public service. I hear now the words of two of our most experienced leaders: Mary Regan saying, "I always thought I could do my job a little bit better," and Rich Boyd saying, "I'm leaving my agency in good shape for my successor." We see them as leaders because they exemplify our own aspirations.

Last year in my report, I noted the primary challenges of the recessionary economy, the increasingly loud voices of those who see government itself as a problem, and the changes in arts delivery and participation evolving in the context of digital technology. I suggested that, looking ahead, programs centered in place making, creative economy, health and sustainability, tourism and packaged cultural assets such as festivals, trails and districts offered promise because they unite and present together our not-for-profit, for-profit and amateur constituencies. I think all this is just as true today.

But there should be a place sometime in our year for reminding ourselves of why we, ourselves, really care that the arts are available in our state—why equity of access and the pursuit of the transforming artistic experience is important to us.

The work we do is central to the health of a truly democratic society. There are many reasons this is true. Here, at our Leadership Institute, we have just invested our time and energy in identifying our most important challenges, engaging in self-criticism, and imagining alternatives. The places and spaces and times where art is practiced provide and preserve exactly that opportunity of examination and improvement for a

democratic society. It might be the dramatization of local stories in rural Colquitt, Georgia, that the community production called Swamp Gravy has produced and presented annually since 1990. It might be the dramatic reflection on logging and mining and now urban life that their History Theater producing over a hundred new plays since 1977 offers the Twin Cities. It might be the exhibits of ethnic traditions and local or global cultural expressions we find in our museums. It might be performance that illuminates issues of equity and social change, such as Marty Pottenger's work on poetry, photography and other artistic projects with police, public service and union employees for Portland, Maine, and other cities. It might be the work of the Orton Foundation, whose process to identify the heart and soul that unite a community includes digital and other storytelling and the arts as a catalyst for citizen engagement. It might also be the portrayal of love across tribal boundaries, which is what *Romeo and Juliet*, and then *West Side Story*, provide. Or of individual and family values clashing with the law, which for thousands of years has been the theme of *Antigone*. Or of the tensions between power and friendship and democracy itself that are at the core of *Julius Caesar*. The places and spaces in a nation's life where its people narrate and exhibit and dramatize their issues preserve its freedom and its capacity for self-criticism, and therefore its ability to improve.

And further, creative writing, visual art, music and drama all teach empathy. The arts help us understand how perception works. You learn how your voice is filtered by the culture and conventions of others and become aware of your own filters. You learn that sometimes others perceive and judge as you do and that sometimes you are in the minority. Through participation in the arts, we learn the value of protecting the minority voice and viewpoint. We come to realize that all individuals—whatever majorities and minorities we inhabit at a given time—must work for that protection or it will not exist when we need it. The Greeks had it right with their logo for drama—the masks of comedy and tragedy. When we put them on, we see through the eyes of another. You can have elements of a democracy, such as elections and multiple parties, and they can help you be more efficient in the persecution of minorities. It is empathy that drives civil liberties. It is empathy that motivates people to perpetuate the kind of democracy we think of as American.

We should not be surprised that research by the NEA and others links the reading of literature and participation in the arts strongly to higher levels of civic engagement—to volunteering, giving and voting.

With regard to education in a democracy, we, who understand how we have been empowered and our lives transformed by artistic experience, have the responsibility to explain that the arts are a symbol system. We can call that symbol system imagery. Artistic skills are the tools of the senses. When we learn the arts, we become aware of how we see, hear, verbalize, move, dramatize, exhibit, taste and smell—how we can use our senses to perceive, understand, create, make meaning, make judgments, communicate and make beauty. We also use numbers to understand and manage our world and ourselves. We also use words. There are actually very few things we ever do or think about that do not draw upon a combination of imagery, literacy and numeracy. They are each a symbol system and together they make up the language arts. For an educator to think that any one or two of these symbol systems is so important that it should exclude the learning of another is to make a horrendous mistake, a mistake that will diminish the potential of every student and tragically reduce the ability of many students to succeed in school and the workplace.

Also, whatever benefits the arts provide—and on this subject reasonable people can argue—it is better to have them than not to have them. As we watch more than a million young people drop out of high school every year, James Catterall demonstrates that students with high arts involvement perform better on standardized achievement tests, participate in more community service and report less boredom in school. Shirley Brice Heath's research finds that arts-involved students are twice as likely to win an award for academic achievement, four times more likely to participate in a math or science fair, and three times more likely to win an award for school attendance. Researcher Dennie Palmer Wolf observes that students creating an opera together showed more likelihood than students working together in other subject classes to participate, to connect what they said to previous comments, to revise their earlier ideas, to critique others constructively, to link their comments to a theme raised by the group—and to increase these collaborative behaviors over time.

We are all familiar with the evidence in the research compendium [Critical Links](#), and in many other studies, that the arts provide unique and long-lasting benefits. My simple point here is that students who have arts classes have advantages over students who don't. One of the purposes of public education in a democracy is to give everyone a fair chance. Millions of kids whose parents are not well informed or affluent, or maybe just got to this country, or for one reason or another are not very involved in their education don't get the arts. And they won't get them unless public schools offer them as part of the basic curriculum. And that is not fair. That is not democratic. We don't institutionalize inequities in the kind of democracy we want to have. Providing all children with learning in the arts, empowering all children to learn as best they can, is an essential part of democratic practice.

Finally, we must consider the survival of the species, of humankind. We know that water shortages, food shortages, energy crises, climate change and inequities of many kinds are global problems, all of which have the potential to lead to violence anywhere and on a massive scale. None of these issues is amenable to solution by nations as they currently exist and relate to each other. Scientists, technologists, engineers and mathematicians may contribute to solutions, but only if they envision possibilities, only if they cross boundaries in their imaginations, only if they design a future different from the past—only if they learn to behave as artists. How many of us would understand how DNA works if not for the double helix drawn by Hilda Crick, the artist wife of the Nobel prize winner? Just recently, users of a new computer graphic software took only two weeks to respond to an on-line challenge from scientists and describe in three dimensions the structure of an enzyme critical in controlling the progress of AIDS. The scientists had been working on this problem themselves for years.

In his new book, [That Used to Be Us: How America Fell Behind in the World It Invented and How We Can Come Back](#), Thomas Friedman criticizes our education system, our immigration policy, our energy policy, and our growing disparity of haves and have-nots. On television, he was asked, "Does your book have a happy ending?" Yes," he said, "but I don't know whether it's fiction or nonfiction." What I have to add is my certainty that what the happy ending looks like will be fiction first if it is ever to be nonfiction. Not only our leaders, but all our citizens must receive an education that prepares them for profound acts of imagination.

Every weapon we have invented we have always used. The future must be different from the past. You in this room, who understand what participation in the arts does and what arts learning is, are very important people. You created NASAA because you always believe you can do your job a little better.

I thank you for coming to this gathering and for your support of NASAA all year round. I am especially grateful to the NASAA board, committees, task forces, advisory groups and executive committee. It has been a pleasure to work directly with NASAA President Suzi Surkamer and I look forward to teaming up with our new president, Arni Fishbaugh.

I add my thanks and admiration to NASAA's fantastic staff, especially our chiefs— Laura Smith, chief advancement officer; Kelly Barsdate, chief program and planning officer; and the incomparable Dennis Dewey, chief operating and financial officer.

I am honored to serve as your CEO. Thank you, everyone.