

MAPPING THE ARTS

TX Uses Data to Spotlight Disparities and Drive Equal Access to Arts Education

William H. Woodwell Jr.

Houston, Texas, has emerged as a 21st-century creative hub, with a lively music scene and an enviable assortment of museums and galleries showcasing a rich diversity of art. As recently as two years ago, however, the Bayou City's enthusiastic embrace of the arts wasn't reflected in the priorities of the city's public schools, which assigned one staff person to oversee fine arts programming for 210,000 students across 280 campuses.

That changed in 2017, when the Houston Independent School District established a nine-person fine arts department. Today, former choral music teacher and arts school principal Wenden Sanders leads the department's efforts to develop curriculum, write grants, organize professional development activities for art teachers, manage arts festivals and other events, and champion the arts across the district. The district's work is happening with the active partnership of a local collective impact collaborative called [Arts Connect Houston](#).

"Houston ISD and Arts Connect Houston are doing incredible work," said Jenny Parry, a one-time art teacher who is now director of programs with the Texas Cultural Trust. "From creating new infrastructure to acknowledging inequity to truly embracing the importance of expanding access to the arts, Houston is making real progress."

A Series of Case Studies in Arts Education Data

This is one in a series of three case studies that describe how state and community leaders have come together to ensure that families, educators and policymakers have better information about students' opportunities in arts education. Read the other case studies:

- [Getting to 100 Percent: How NJ Used Data-Driven Strategies to Achieve Universal Access to Arts Education.](#)
- [From Data to Action: CA Applies Collective Impact Approach to Track Arts Education and Drive Improvement.](#)

These case studies are a product of the [State Data Infrastructure Project for Arts Education](#), a collaboration between the National Endowment for the Arts and Education Commission of the States to create tools and provide technical assistance that help states extract, analyze and report on data about arts education. Other SDIP publications include:

- [Using State Data Systems to Report Information on Arts Education.](#)
- [50-State Comparison: Arts Education Data Collection and Reporting.](#)
- [The State Education Data Toolkit.](#)

These reports, tools and stories aim to empower decision-makers with the information they need to ensure that every American student has the opportunity to excel in and through the arts.

Data-Driven Improvement

Arts Connect Houston grew out of an earlier effort funded by the National Endowment for the Arts to expand and improve arts education in the city through strategies like data collection and reporting. Through its [Collective Impact Grants Program](#), the Arts Endowment continues to fund Arts Connect Houston's work to ensure access to arts education in the Greater Houston community. The Arts Endowment has fueled broader adoption of the [collective impact](#) model of social change, including an emphasis on collecting and disseminating better data, across the country.

Houston's work on the issue reflects a data-driven, statewide push in Texas to reduce inequities in arts access. At the heart of it all is an initiative administered by the Texas Cultural Trust. Called Art Can, it's an effort to quantify the impact of the arts on education and the economy across Texas. Among its signature products is an interactive online [map](#) that allows users to explore arts education access in school districts, campuses and legislative districts across the state. The map is based on data that is already collected by the Texas Education Agency for every district and campus reporting to the state.

Art Can researchers use the data to determine student-teacher ratios for arts classes, the number of unique arts courses taught and average arts credits earned, among other indicators. Based on the data, schools and districts are assigned to one of five categories, from "improvement needed" to "distinguished. For middle schools and high schools, "improvement needed" means two things: The school had more than 300 students for every fine arts teacher; and 6 percent or fewer students were enrolled in fine arts

courses compared to all courses offered. By comparison, a "distinguished" middle school or high school would have less than 145 students per fine arts teacher and 25 percent or more students enrolled in fine arts courses compared to all courses offered.

The Texas Cultural Trust website includes a widget that allows users to contact their state lawmakers and school district leaders, both to draw the leaders' attention to the data and to encourage support for expanded arts access for students. The website also produces downloadable tables and graphics to take to meetings with government and school officials.

Art Can is supported by the Houston Endowment and the University of Texas at Austin College of Fine Arts, as well as other foundations and individual donors. In addition to the Art Can map, the program conducts and publishes research on [the positive impacts of the arts and arts education](#) on everything from student attendance and discipline to the performance of the Texas economy. Among the findings: Texas public school students who are enrolled in arts courses attend school more regularly and have up to 15 percent higher pass rates on standardized tests. The research also includes opinion polling to measure Texans' attitudes toward the arts and arts education. Every year, the Texas Cultural Trust produces a [State of the Arts Report](#) summarizing Art Can's latest research and making a case for ongoing investments to expand student access to the arts.

No Guarantee of Equal Access

Like most states, Texas has laws describing the basic requirements of schools and districts for providing arts instruction to students. But arts

supporters at the state and local levels have long made the case that, without data, the law alone cannot guarantee equal access.

Texas law requires that elementary schools provide essential knowledge and skills in visual arts, music and theater; but districts and schools have the flexibility to determine how to meet this requirement. In addition, Texas, like many states, does not track enrollment in arts courses at the elementary level, making it difficult to determine whether students are enrolled in standalone art, music or theater classes. “It’s a challenge to know what schools are even offering,” Parry said.

When students get to middle school and high school, the requirements get more specific. For example, middle school students are required to take one arts course between sixth and eighth grade, and high school students must have one fine arts credit in order to graduate. Middle schools also are required to offer 3 of the 4 arts disciplines (visual art, dance, music and theater), while high schools have to offer two.

Supporters of the arts in Texas say state law cannot always ensure clear-cut requirements when it comes to arts programming in schools. For example, smaller schools can be exempted from the requirements, and schools across Texas often struggle to find certified arts teachers. As a result, many elementary schools assign arts instruction to general education teachers instead.

“We have decent requirements, but they aren’t a guarantee that all students are getting the high-quality arts education they deserve,” said Gary Gibbs, executive director of the Texas Commission on the Arts. He added that the Art Can data provides policymakers, parents, educators and students with a better idea of how the state’s public schools are meeting both the spirit and the letter of the law. “Now we

have the ability to look at individual campuses and see what’s truly happening. And we can promote stronger arts programs across the board, especially where there are real gaps,” Gibbs said.

Tackling Inequities

Since Art Can was established in 2016, a consistent theme has emerged in the data its researchers analyzed: Access to arts education for students in Texas is a story of what Jenny Parry calls “extreme disparities.”

“Just because there are laws and rules aimed at ensuring that all students get an arts education doesn’t mean it’s being done on the same level across schools and districts,” she said. Among the students with the least access to arts education are those in Title I schools in the state’s rural communities. And although Texas has many large, urban school districts, most public school students in the state attend schools in rural areas.

Gibbs said the Art Can data has affirmed what many in the state’s arts community suspected. “We have places that are abundant with arts education, and we also have art deserts where there is very little happening,” he said. Gibbs, who formerly served as education director with the Houston Grand Opera, added that the one arts program that’s strong in most schools in Texas is marching band because of the state’s love of football. “Beyond that there are real and clear disparities, and it often comes down to race and income,” with communities of color and low-income communities more likely to be classified as art deserts, Gibbs noted.

That’s why Art Can relies so heavily on data to highlight inequities and drive expanded arts access for Texas students. At the University

of Texas at Austin College of Fine Arts, for example, administrators and faculty use the Art Can data, along with their own research, to identify schools and districts that would benefit from hiring certified arts teachers. Each year, the College of Fine Arts graduates between 50 and 60 new art teachers.

Roxanne Schroeder-Arce, a former high school theater educator who directs the college's UTeach Fine Arts program, said the Art Can data helps spotlight critical needs across schools and districts. "Having that data for the state is wonderful for us and prepares us to create other initiatives to meet the needs the data shows," she said.

As an example, she cited the college's efforts to provide students with stipends and other resources to incentivize them to work in Title I schools. "We want to make it clear to students that we will support them in filling these gaps and bringing the arts to underserved areas, and the data allows us to see where there is more need."

Schroeder-Arce also said that Art Can has inspired the university and other partners to go to the next level in their data-gathering work. Currently, the College of Fine Arts is developing its own statewide map to show where its graduates are teaching, how many are working in Title I schools and where the teaching gaps are.

"By knowing what's needed and where, Art Can makes it possible for us to help communities that need more access," said Schroeder-Arce.

Additional data gathering is happening at the local level. Sanders of the Houston Independent School District shared the story of his fine arts department visiting all of the city's 280 public schools in 2017 and 2018 to develop an inventory of musical instruments, kilns and

other arts equipment. "There was no central repository. No one could tell us what was out there and what people were doing with this stuff," Sanders said. "We were finding musical instruments stored in closets, and no one knew they were there."

Sanders and his team used the data to paint a clearer picture of the varying needs of different schools in the city. The fine arts department also documented arts spaces in different schools and the schools' varying policies for scheduling fine arts classes. "Everyone had something different," Sanders said. He added that his department now is trying to spur a more aligned approach to budgeting and scheduling for arts programs across the district. Among the recent achievements: The current superintendent [approved](#) 37 elementary school fine arts teachers in schools that Sanders' department identified as art deserts.

Collective Impact in Action

Beyond its research activities, the Art Can program has an active communications and outreach component designed to get Art Can data and research into the hands of parents, educators, lawmakers and other critical audiences. Art Can produces targeted digital advertising, as well as English- and Spanish-language radio commercials that are distributed through the Texas Association of Broadcasters and National Public Radio. In addition, Texas Cultural Trust leaders, staff and researchers regularly appear before key audiences to discuss the Art Can initiative.

In 2017, with a new executive director at the helm, the Texas Cultural Trust decided to make Art Can the foundation of its work. The vision was to create a collective impact initiative to enlist diverse constituencies in the work of

advancing the arts and arts education across Texas. As part of the effort, the Texas Cultural Trust created an [arts education task force](#) comprising 30 leaders from such organizations as the state board of education, local school districts, statewide and local arts organizations, the Texas Parent Teachers Association and more. The group was tasked with identifying what constitutes equitable arts access for Texas students.

During fall 2018, the task force held monthly meetings that concluded with the creation of an evaluation [rubric](#) that schools and districts can use to identify levels of arts access in education. The rubric includes arts access indicators that allow for the classification of arts access in a school or district on the five-component scale used in the Art Can map. Using the rubric, schools and districts can take a deeper dive into understanding and evaluating arts access at the local level.

The Art Can map rates arts access using two datapoints from Texas Education Agency data: the ratio of fine arts teachers to students; and the percentage of students participating in fine arts classes. For the rubric, schools and districts collect additional datapoints, such as average class size in fine arts classes, minutes of fine arts instruction per year in each arts discipline, whether arts instruction is provided by certified arts teachers, and more.

The rubric has been piloted in schools across Texas in the hope that it will eventually be used by the Texas Education Agency and district administrators to evaluate levels of arts education access and support equitable arts education.

Deborah Lugo, the director of Arts Connect Houston, served on the task force and said it was a valuable experience. “If we know how to measure something and we can agree on that,

we can have the same language to talk about it with different audiences,” Lugo said. “The benchmarks for the state will be the launching pad for all of us to work internally in our districts and communities to raise the bar on arts access.”

Another task force participant was Carla Schumann, director of fine arts with Comal Independent School District, located between San Antonio and Austin. Schumann said she used the rubric to assess where the schools in Comal County ranked in providing equitable arts access. “We want to be an exemplary district in everything we do, so this helped us identify where there were gaps and what we needed to do so more students could access the arts,” she said.

After the rubric revealed a lack of theater instruction in elementary schools in the district, Schumann arranged for a company to provide teachers with resources and ideas for incorporating theater content into their English and social studies instruction. The district also provided elementary teachers with training on how to use the new resources during the summer Comal U program for returning teachers. Schumann intends to track student scores in social studies and English to assess the impact of these activities.

“If I can prove that students in these classrooms are scoring better, then that will help us make the case for even more attention to theater and the arts,” Schumann said.

An Engine for Change

Whether in Comal or Houston or any other community in Texas, the collective impact approach at the heart of Art Can provides a model for building support for expanded

access to arts education. In a large and decentralized school district like Houston's, for example, it can be hard to get principals and other school leaders to agree to devote more resources and attention to the arts. But Sanders' team and the school district's partners in Arts Connect Houston are making headway. Starting in fall 2019, for example, [every student](#) from kindergarten through fifth grade in Houston public schools was taking weekly classes taught by a certified fine arts teacher.

"Here in Houston, it is up to principals to decide how budgets will work and what emphasis to put on the arts," said Caroline Goeser, who oversees educational activities for the Museum of Fine Arts Houston, an active partner in Arts Connect Houston. "That's why collective impact is so important. We bring people from across this community into our circle so we can convince them of the value of this work. We now have an active community and an active engine for change," she said.

Goeser added that good decisions rely on good data. Arts Connect Houston, for example,

regularly works to establish correlations between arts access and improved attendance and other measures of school success — in part to mobilize principals to support this work. Goeser cited new [research](#) conducted for the Houston Arts Access Initiative that highlighted the positive impact of arts learning experiences on discipline, compassion and improvements in writing achievement. "There has to be an element of practicality in the data that can help drive what we are trying to do," she said.

The desire for "practicality in the data" is also what drives Art Can's statewide research on the impact of arts education and a powerful arts community on the Texas economy. In February 2019, the Texas Cultural Trust released the [2019 State of the Arts Report](#) during its annual Arts Advocacy Day in Austin. In visits with lawmakers, supporters of the arts presented the report and explained the importance of broadening access to arts education.

"Having the Art Can data takes all of our work to a whole different level," said Parry.

Examples of State Data Dashboards

CALIFORNIA: Explore the California Arts Education Data Project [interactive dashboards](#).

NEW JERSEY: Explore the [Interactive School Performance Dashboard](#) for New Jersey.

TEXAS: Explore the Art Can [State of the Arts Map](#).

About the Author

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William H. Woodwell Jr. is a writer, editor and author who works with a range of organizations to share powerful stories of impact on key issues facing communities and the world. From interviewing and research to framing and content development, Bill helps clients drive awareness and action on topics from education and equity to climate change. More info at www.whwoodwell.com.

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