

The Arts Access Gap—Where Does Your District Stand?

By Robert Rader, Executive Director, CABE

Editor's Note: This Commentary was written before the COVID-19 virus crisis began in Connecticut. While we would usually wait until the July/August CABE Journal to publish this, we thought it important to provide it to Connecticut's school boards and superintendents as they consider their budgets for next year and their reopening. It is especially important to assess your arts program, as some activities, such as band, drama and chorus will be especially difficult in a time of required social distancing.

Connecticut's Next Generation Accountability System is a "broad set of 12 indicators that help tell the story of how well a school is preparing its students for success in college and life." Every school receives a score determined "using a formula that incorporates the... indicators."*

I was curious about the last indicator on the list, *Arts Access*, so Lisa Steimer and I sat down with Dee Hansen, Rick Sadlon and Angela Griffin of the Connecticut Arts Administrators Association (CAAA)** to discuss our current state of arts education and access.

Mr. Sadlon stated that it's his belief that "arts education is a window into the health of a district." He has provided professional development on arts education in many districts and that there are wide discrepancies between districts and even schools within districts on access to the arts and quality of teaching the arts.

His belief is that "energetic, creative teachers" are a necessary ingredient in our schools. This is true, he stated, especially in the middle grades since arts are generally electives—and students won't want to take arts classes if teachers are not spirited and enthusiastic. In those cases, there will be a gap for students between the middle grades and high school—leading districts to shut down high school band, orchestra or other opportunities.

One of the other issues is the difficulty in developing and following excellent curriculum across schools and districts. There is no longer an arts "expert" at SDE and standardizing best practices in this area is especially difficult.

The CAAA representatives also believed that there is an "arts access gap" [my words], between schools in wealthier areas and poorer districts, especially urban

areas. There are 104 members in the CAAA and many of the poorer districts cannot afford a full-time arts administrator who could standardize the curriculum across the whole district, ensure quality of teaching and work with others doing similar work in other districts.

I asked Chief Performance Officer Ajit Gopalakrishnan about what SDE's statistics indicate about an arts access gap. His reply was that

“the Next Generation Accountability System expects that at least 60% of the students in Grades 9 through 12 will participate in at least one arts course during the year. In 2018-19, while the state average was 51.9 percent, there was variability among the districts.

Only 29% of the 145 districts with this indicator met the standard though another 34% were between 50% and 60% of student participation in arts courses. Among the remaining 53 districts with less than 50% student participation in the arts, 13 were Alliance Districts...”

This indicates that districts with fewer resources do not have the means to provide as many opportunities for arts education as other districts. Poorer districts are being asked to raise their arts access without the means to do so.

Concerns of Arts Administrators

According to the CAAA, evaluations of arts teachers are often conducted by administrators who may have no background in this subject area. In those cases, they told us, evaluations are often *pro forma*. In some districts, there might have been an arts administrator who left, but, too often replacing that person is not seen as a high priority.

Other concerns:

- Not enough supplies;
- Not enough music available for students;
- Not enough money for instrument repairs;
- Not enough flexibility in scheduling for students; and,
- Not enough articulation between schools and grades vertically, so that the primary school work flows seamlessly into the middle school and then to the high school.

However, we know that in many cases arts education is a highlight of the district. Here are just some of the reasons quality arts education is so important:

- For some students, it is the art, music and drama that encourage them to come to school every day;
- Arts education teaches students the 21st Century skills that are so important. Band, for example, teaches collaboration, critical thinking and problem solving;
- Arts give students a perspective beyond some of the other subjects, such as math and English. It helps one become more well-rounded;
- In the Connecticut Common Core, music and the visual arts are recommended to help teach literacy;
- Arts education can help with the teaching of social emotional learning skills;
- Students who are involved in the arts are often top-performers on other indicia of success;
- Students starting college have an immediate group with which to bond if, for example, they go out for band or other arts activities;
- It can aid districts by reaching out to the community. When their students are brought to senior citizen centers and community events, they serve as representatives of the whole district and, encourage members of the community to take pride in their schools. Such pride can help a district—especially when it comes time to vote on budgets; and,
- my favorite, provided by Mr. Sadlon, “where else do you get 80 students with just one teacher and no chaos?”

We know that a lack of resources sometimes makes it necessary for school boards to eliminate classes and activities. However, knowing the importance of the arts, it remains critical that we find the resources to ensure all students have the access to great arts programs.

[*https://portal.ct.gov/SDE/Performance/Performance-and-Accountability/Next-Generation-Accountability-System](https://portal.ct.gov/SDE/Performance/Performance-and-Accountability/Next-Generation-Accountability-System)

**Professor Hansen is president of the CAAA; Mr. Sadlon is Music Director in Darien Public Schools; and, Ms. Griffin is Director of Music Arts in Simsbury Public Schools.

Sidebar

Simsbury Arts Education

Ms. Griffin told us about the work done in the Drama Department in the Simsbury Schools. According to her, the plays that were put on every year at the high school did not attract a diverse group of students of color. But, in an attempt to gain more diversity in the production, the Simsbury Music Department consciously decided to put on “Hairspray”, and specifically selected a musical that would also reach out to engage the interest of students of color.

The department also reached out to its Open Choice Program Liaison and parents and ensured that any students involved in the play would have transportation home and meals, so that the students who lived in Hartford could play roles in the play. It was, according to Ms. Griffin, a “great example of collaboration.”

And, the show?

“Terrific” she added.