

KNOWLEDGE IN BRIEF

Findings You Can Use from New Wallace Research

TWEEN TALK

WHEN IT COMES TO ARTS PROGRAMS, KIDS HAVE “SOMETHING TO SAY”

Suppose afterschool arts programs tried a marketplace model to get more low-income, urban young people involved in the arts. That would make youngsters the programs’ “consumers” – with many options for their time and attention – and suggest the wisdom of finding out what these potential customers actually want.

A novel study, commissioned by The Wallace Foundation, adopted just such a market research approach. The team behind *Something to Say: Success Principles for Afterschool Arts Programs from Urban Youth and Other Experts* interviewed more than 200 young people to see what inhibited them from taking part in afterschool arts programs, what would bring them in and what would keep them coming back. It then compared their views to the views of a group of leading arts program directors, researchers and other authorities on what constitutes effective afterschool arts programming. Happily, the two sets of perspectives largely matched, with both kids and adults agreeing that afterschool arts programs should include real-world artists as teachers, hands-on projects, safe and inspiring spaces, and public events to showcase the work.

Arts engagement delivers important benefits to young people, but urban, low-income youngsters too often opt out. The authors of *Something to Say* went to community centers, churches and grocery stores in economically distressed neighborhoods to find kids and learn why. Their focus was “tweens” – grades five through eight – based on the principle that a satisfying experience for this age group could help avoid the steep drop-off in arts participation seen among teenagers. Tweens were interviewed in focus groups and in their homes; researchers interviewed parents, too.

While much research has concentrated on a “supply-side” problem – the very real shortage of high-quality arts programs – the first part of the report calls attention to the

IN THEIR VOICES

On household decision-making about participation in afterschool:

“It’s not worth the time and money if he does not want to do it.” —PARENT OF 5TH-GRADER, CLEVELAND

“I decide what I want to do; mom decides if it is O.K. or not.” —5TH GRADE GIRL, SAN FRANCISCO

On the ideal afterschool arts instructor:

“[Teachers should push] hard enough so they let me know I can do it, but not so hard that it makes me want to quit.” —7TH GRADE BOY, OAKLAND

“Someone who makes sure everybody gets a chance to shine.” —6TH GRADE GIRL, PHILADELPHIA

On the ideal program’s atmosphere:

“It should feel welcoming from the minute you walk in. People should look at you with smiles on their faces. Teachers should care that you’re there.” —TWEEN FROM BIRMINGHAM

“...the greatest thing is all the support that you get there. The poet mentors bring the support; they bring the safe space; they bring the experience; and they bring all that in one package.”

—TEEN IN YOUTH SPEAKS, A SPOKEN WORD ORGANIZATION

“demand” side and comes away with three basic insights from the tweens.

- *Many barriers stand between young people and the arts.*

Terminology can be a problem. Say “arts,” and tweens often think only of visual arts, namely drawing and painting, and associate the word with museums – turn-offs to those whose creative interests lay elsewhere. But mention specific types of visual arts, such as design and digital media, or altogether different art forms, such as dancing and beat-making, and they’re more interested, researchers found.

Peer pressure to be “cool” is an issue among tweens that grows even bigger with teenagers. Boys who privately told researchers that they enjoyed activities such as photography or singing clammed up if other boys were around. Also, because they viewed appearing inexperienced at something as socially risky, many youngsters indicated they would join only activities they knew they were good at.

Parents often were not encouraging. Over and over, they said that sports were their preference for equipping their children for personal and financial success. Many decried some variation of the “starving artist” stereotype, while buying into the idea that their child could hit the jackpot

as a high-priced professional athlete.

- *Tweens have a major say in what activities they take part in; they are also quick to disengage.*

Across many American households, tweens have so much clout in picking their activities that the report urges programs to train their marketing on them instead of their parents. Add to that the distractions of new technologies, including social media, and programs are up against youngsters’ inclination to drop out in their continual search for the *next* big thing.

The report also points to pacing as crucial. Right away, programs have to let tweens create and do. Programs also need to ensure that activities are neither too boring nor too difficult to hold their young people’s interest. Up-to-date technology is also a big plus.

- *Arts programs need to have certain features, especially the possibility of fun.*

Tweens’ No. 1 requirement for programs? Fun. Looking to find out what exactly they mean by that, researchers charted both the youngsters’ expressed and “latent” – real, often unexpressed – needs, as shown below:

CRITERIA / STATED NEED	UNDERLYING OR LATENT NEEDS
Fun	Novelty; stimulation; de-stressing
Expert instructors	Mastery
Attention from instructor; fair treatment	Mentors; external validation
Hands-on experiential learning; collaborative decision making; equipment	Self-expression; autonomy; influence; access to resources
Safe environments; rules; no yelling/no pushing; serious participants	Physical and emotional safety
Meeting new people; being with friends	Community; belonging
Culminating events; competition	Purpose; display of skill and mastery
Membership “badges,” such as T-shirts, greeting rituals, clothing patches	Belonging
Awards; trophies; certificates	Recognition and reinforcement
Field trips	Exposure to larger world
Snacks	Abating hunger

Complementing the voices of young people, the report also delivers “supply-side” expertise, provided in part through insights from eight youth programs that are getting it right, seven of them focused on the arts.

The model programs offer a variety of youth-centric best practices. Poetry performances by Youth Speaks, in the San Francisco Bay area, inspire youngsters with high writing standards and high production quality in professional theaters with features ranging from sound and lighting systems to greenrooms. Strong mentoring relationships – that nonetheless leave youngsters much personal freedom in defining their projects – are an important aspect of programming at Spy Hop, a youth media arts center in Salt Lake City. And creating – and naming – programs to

appeal to youngsters (Digital Street Photography and Comic Books, for example) is a hallmark of the Fleisher Youth Art Programs, part of a community arts organization in Philadelphia.

The report also culled from more than 100 literature sources and interviews with 22 experts – researchers, leaders in arts programming for young people and others – to produce the “Top 10” traits of high-quality arts programs:

Ten Principles for Effective, High-Quality Afterschool Arts Programs	
1. Instructors are professional, practicing artists, and are valued with compensation for their expertise and investment in their professional development.	6. Positive relationships with adult mentors and peers foster a sense of belonging and acceptance.
2. Executive directors have a public commitment to high-quality arts programs that is supported by sustained action.	7. Youth participants actively shape the programs and assume meaningful leadership roles.
3. Arts programs take place in dedicated, inspiring, welcoming spaces and affirm the value of art and artists.	8. Programs focus on hands-on skill building using current equipment and technology.
4. There is a culture of high expectations, respect for creative expression and affirmation of youth participants as artists.	9. Programs strategically engage key stakeholders to create a network of support for both youth participants and the programs.
5. Programs culminate in high-quality public events with real audiences.	10. Programs provide a physically and emotionally safe place for youth.

RELATED KNOWLEDGE

Want to find out more about young people and the arts? The following publications and more can be downloaded free of charge from www.wallacefoundation.org.

[New Opportunities for Interest-Driven Arts Learning in a Digital Age](#), The Wallace Foundation, 2013.

[Advancing Arts Education through an Expanded School Day: Lessons from Five Schools](#), The National Center on Time & Learning, 2013.

[Collaboration Paints a Bright Future for Arts Education](#), Learning Forward, 2011.

[The Qualities of Quality: Understanding Excellence in Arts Education](#), Project Zero, Harvard Graduate School of Education, 2009.

[Increasing Arts Demand Through Better Arts Learning](#), The Wallace Foundation, 2009.

[Revitalizing Arts Education Through Community-Wide Coordination](#), RAND Corporation, 2008.

[Gifts of the Muse - Reframing the Debate About the Benefits of the Arts](#), RAND Corporation, 2005.

ABOUT THE WALLACE FOUNDATION

The Wallace Foundation is a national philanthropy that seeks to improve learning and enrichment opportunities for disadvantaged children. The foundation finances projects to test innovative ideas for solving important social problems, conducting research to find out what works and what doesn't and to fill key knowledge gaps – and then communicating the results to help others.

Wallace has five major initiatives under way:

- School leadership: Strengthening education leadership to improve student achievement.
- Afterschool: Helping selected cities make good afterschool programs available to many more children.
- Audience development for the arts: Making the arts a part of many more people's lives by working with arts organizations to broaden, deepen and diversify audiences.
- Arts education: Expanding arts learning opportunities for children and teens.
- Summer and expanded learning time: Better understanding the impact of high-quality summer learning programs on disadvantaged children, and enriching and expanding the school day.

Find out more at www.wallacefoundation.org.

<https://doi.org/10.59656/A-YA1597.002>