

The Arts and Dropout Prevention: The Power of Art to Engage

A National Dropout Prevention
Center/Network White Paper

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The mission of the National Dropout Prevention Center/Network (NDPC/N) is to increase high school graduation rates and reduce school dropout rates through research, research dissemination, and the provision of evidence-based solutions. It accomplishes these goals by serving as a clearinghouse and network for evidence-based information that supports dropout prevention. The NDPC/N provides technical assistance and other professional assistance to school districts in the United States, all in support of dropout prevention. Fifteen effective strategies (National Dropout Prevention Center/Network, n.d.) guide the work of the NDPC/N. This paper touches on several strategies as they relate to the arts and dropout prevention. The topics in this paper include (a) arts and dropout prevention, (b) arts and student engagement, and (c) identifying and developing career pathways in the arts.

FRAMING THE ISSUE

Arts education is associated with lower dropout rates, as well as better academic outcomes (Elpus, 2013; Catterall, Dumais, & Hampden-Thompson, 2012; Scheuler, 2010; Barry, Taylor, Walls, & Wood, 1990; Isreal, 2009; Deasy, 2002). Studying the arts promotes academic self-efficacy and school engagement (predictors of persistence to graduation), and it enhances socioemotional skills valued in social relationships, the workplace, and education settings (Beveridge, 2010). As research continues to clarify those connections, and dropout prevention strategies are consciously integrated into arts education, arts education should be considered more intentionally as a dropout prevention strategy. However, since one expected outcome of education is preparation for an eventual career after school, we cannot in good conscience suggest using arts education as a tool to prevent dropout without at the same time supporting and recommending the identification of or creation of realistic career pathways for students of the arts. The National Dropout Prevention Center/Network has a number of recommendations to support the good work of arts education.

Studying the arts promotes academic self-efficacy and school engagement and it enhances socioemotional skills valued in social relationships, the workplace, and education settings.

Current Research

In the last few decades, there has been increased focus on accountability for education spending. Several prominent studies (Fiske, 1999; Isreal, 2009; Scheuler, 2010; Catterall et al., 2012; President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities 2011; Parsad & Spiegelman 2012; Elpus, 2013) link arts education to improving academic outcomes (often for math and language arts, but also across all subjects) and lowering dropout rates, particularly for at-risk students. A longitudinal study by the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA; Catterall et al., 2012), for example, confirmed that arts education predicts better graduation rates, regardless of a student's socio-economic status. After tracking more than 22,000 students for 12 years, the NEA researchers found that students with high levels of involvement in the arts were five times more likely to graduate high school than those with low involvement in the arts. Moreover, students

with low socioeconomic status who were deeply engaged in the arts demonstrated better academic outcomes than students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds who had less arts involvement (Catterall et al., 2012).

Arts education has been shown to improve students' abilities to

- *critique themselves,*
 - *experiment,*
 - *reflect,*
 - *learn from mistakes,*
 - *manage behavior,*
 - *make decisions,*
 - *maintain a positive self-concept,*
 - *maintain self-efficacy*
 - *maintain school engagement,*
 - *have tolerance for others' perspectives, and*
 - *orient themselves toward academic goals, including college attendance and college graduation.*
-

In addition to the positive impact an arts education can have on math, language, and dropout prevention, recent studies have examined student outcomes that more uniquely result from an arts education. An arts education has been shown to raise students' ability to critique themselves, their willingness to experiment, their ability to reflect, and also to learn from mistakes (Robinson, 2013). An arts education increases students' ability to manage behavior, make decisions, and maintain a positive self-concept (Holochwest, Palmer Wolf, Fisher, & O'Grady, 2016). Of special interest is that an arts education increases academic self-efficacy and school engagement (Holochwest et al., 2016), characteristics that reliably predict dropout (Dary, Pickeral, Shumer, & Williams, 2016; Archambault, Janosz, Fallu, & Pagani, 2009; Blum, 2005; Bundick, Quaglia, Corso, & Haywood, 2014; Yazzie-Mintz, 2010; Schunk & Mullen, 2012). In 2013, Kenneth Elpus at University of Maryland published findings using data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health, finding that arts students were 20% less likely to have an out-of-school suspension for each year of arts studied. Additionally, former students of the arts were 29% more likely than former nonarts students to have earned a four-year college degree by age 24 to 32. Moreover, each additional year of arts coursework was associated with a 12% increase in the likelihood that adolescents would eventually earn a four-year college degree.

Research has shown that inputs (like age, prior attitudes, and the type of art discipline studied) also play an important role in determining the impact of an arts education. In a 2016 study of schools across Philadelphia (Holochwest et al., 2016), the authors found that younger students (9 years of age on average) who participated in a music program increased their tolerance for the perspectives of others, increased their growth mindset, and boosted their academic goal orientation more than other age groups. Age appeared a more powerful influence than the quality or frequency of instruction. The Philadelphia study also found that students with high levels of school engagement maintained those levels of school engagement if they participated in an arts program, but if they did not participate, they experienced a sharp decrease in school engagement. A similar pattern was found for academic self-efficacy. Notably, across all age groups, students who showed higher levels in certain domains of socioemotional development prior to participation in an arts program went on to experience "a disproportionate benefit" from the arts education (Holochwest et al., 2016).

Substance abuse and other health-related factors are associated with school dropout. Beyond the student outcomes already mentioned, Elpus (2013) found that the modality of art studied was associated with various additional behavioral outcomes. He learned that for adolescents, marijuana use was 25% less likely in music students, and 47% less likely in dance students. Elpus' study also found that students in visual arts, as compared to other types of arts, had significantly higher levels of school attachment than did non-visual arts students.

What Does This Have To Do With Dropout?

The research demonstrates a direct and powerful relationship between an arts education and dropout prevention. Arts learning increases academic self-efficacy and keeps students engaged and in school (Holochwost et al., 2016). It improves academic outcomes (Catterall et al., 2012), reduces suspensions, predicts higher levels of college attendance and graduation (Elpus, 2013), and promotes desired personal characteristics (Holochwost et al., 2016). Arts education is a powerful tool that educators and policymakers can and should use more intentionally in the fight against high school dropout.

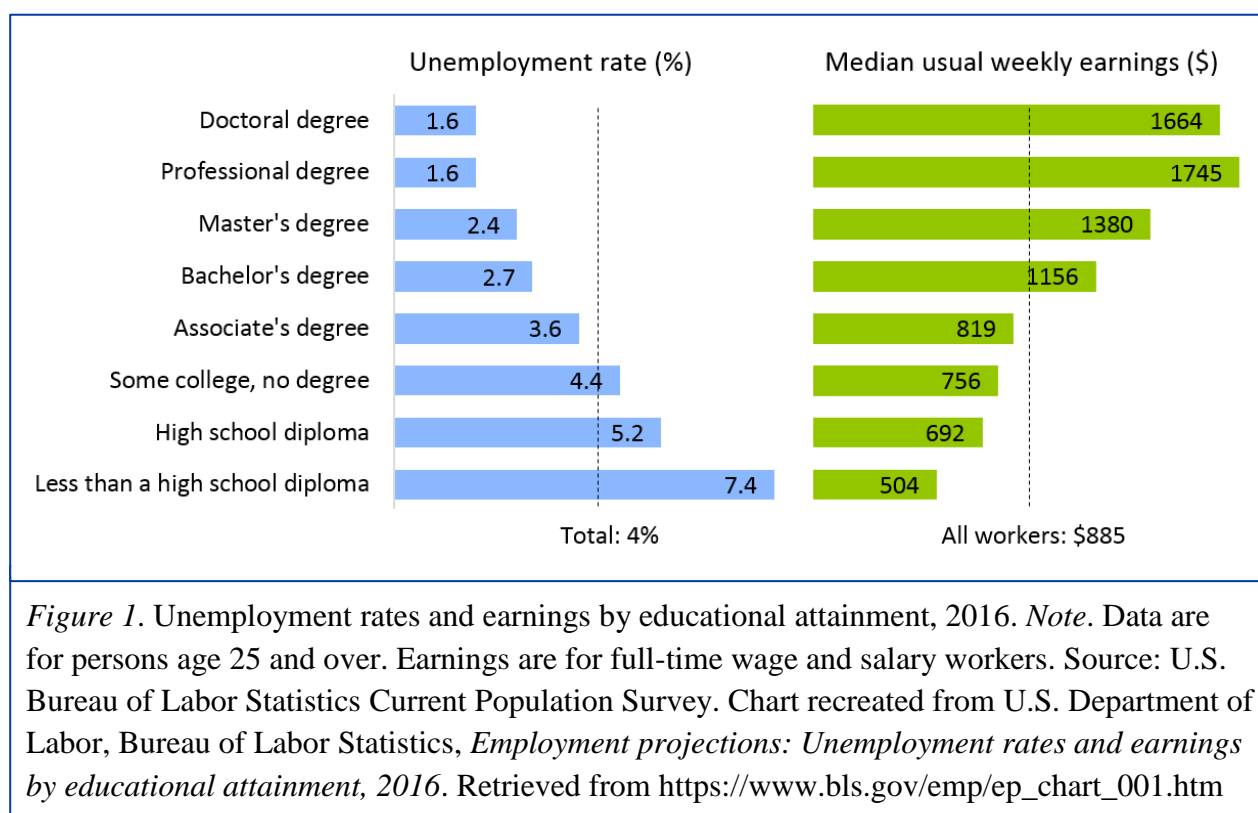
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MULTIPLE AREAS OF IMPACT

Impact on Society

Educating students in the arts has benefits that extend from individual students to our communities. We know that arts education promotes desired socioemotional characteristics, can be associated with the reduction of illicit behavior, can be associated with reduced high school dropout, and can increase college attendance and graduation. In turn, increased levels of education are linked positively to employment and earning levels over a lifetime, higher tax contributions to society, lower costs related to crime and incarceration, and lower cash and in-kind transfer costs to society (Sum, Khatiwada, & McLaughlin, 2009). Figure 1 illustrates average unemployment rates and median weekly earnings by educational attainment. Dropping out of school prior to graduation not only brings lower income potential, but also can lead to unemployment and the pursuant multiple challenges that can be passed down from generation to generation in a “cycle of risk” where poverty, violence, and trauma grow (Buitrago, Rynell, & Tuttle, 2017).

Among state and federal prison inmates, about 41% have not completed a high school diploma or equivalent compared to 18% for the general population 18 years or older (Harlow, 2003). Because arts education supports graduation from high school (the gateway to higher education) and predicts greater attendance and graduation from college, an education in the arts is a tool that should be utilized in the fight against dropout and the multiple problems that can follow.



Research also demonstrates that participation in the arts has a very strong and positive influence on health, another factor that can be related to school dropout. The arts are used for the recovery of veterans suffering PTSD (Donnelly, 2013), and to mediate the effects of dementia (Phillips, Reid-Arndt, & Pak, 2010). The arts also support the health of seniors. In a three-year study on the impact of participating in weekly community-based arts activities, yearly exhibitions, and performances, seniors who participated experienced significantly improved well-being, particularly in their health status, chronic pain, and sense of community (Phinney et al., 2012). All of this would point to art being healing, community building, and contributing to the health of a community. If communities are going to reap the benefits of arts to the health and well-being of adults and seniors, communities must educate and foster artists who can lead those efforts. An arts education has broad social value.

Impact on the Economy

A brief from Alliance for Excellent Education points to several approximations of some of the calculated fiscal benefits of increasing the high school graduation rate in America.

- Compared to a high school dropout, a single high school graduate yields a public benefit of over \$200,000 more in lower government spending and higher tax revenues. If the number of dropouts were cut in half, the government would likely see a total of \$45 billion in savings and additional revenue.
- If the male graduation rate were increased by only 5 percent, the nation would see an annual savings of \$4.9 billion in crime-related costs.

- Cutting the dropout rate of a single high school class in half would likely support as many as 54,000 new jobs and would likely increase the gross domestic product by as much as \$9.6 billion. (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2011, p. 4)

Arts education can improve academic performance and it helps to keep students engaged in school and graduating. Therefore, investing in arts education should be considered for the sake of the economy as well as for the student.

The arts help to maintain attractive communities and thriving local economies.

Additionally, a direct result of educating artists is that communities benefit through architecture, sculpture, live theaters, landscape design, concerts, local cinema, literature, dance, festivals, and other enrichments created by artists. An attractive, culturally rich environment is an important draw for businesses and competitive employees. The arts help to maintain a thriving local economy.

Impact on Schools

Arts education programs benefit schools. Students in the arts have lower dropout rates, higher GPAs, and better scores in math and language on standardized tests, even when controlling for SES as a factor (Fiske, 1999; Isreal, 2009; Scheuler, 2010; Catterall et al., 2012; President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities, 2011; Parsad & Spiegelman, 2012; Elpus, 2013). Better outcomes go hand-in-hand with "reward funding" for schools, as well as with higher employment levels for their graduates, which in turn tend to generate greater local tax streams that feed schools.

The 2011 federal report from the Committee on the Arts and the Humanities, analyzed arts education data and presented the following information related to positive arts education outcomes.

While there is support for the intrinsic value of developing cultural literacy and teaching artistic skills and techniques, leadership groups typically emphasize instrumental outcomes derived from high quality arts education in one or more of the following categories:

- Student **achievement**, typically as represented by reading and mathematics performance on high stakes tests, including **transfer of skills** learning from the arts to learning in other academic areas—for example, the spatial-temporal reasoning skills developed by music instruction;
- Student **motivation and engagement**, including improved attendance, persistence, focused attention, heightened educational aspirations, and intellectual risk taking;
- Development of **habits of mind** including problem solving, critical and **creative thinking**, dealing with ambiguity and complexity, integration of multiple skill sets, and working with others; and

- Development of **social competencies**, including collaboration and team work skills, social tolerance, and self-confidence (President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities, 2011).

These measurable outcomes of arts education should be evidence enough of the value of art to motivate, inspire, engage, and support lifelong learning and success for many youth as well as increased performance of schools.

An effective arts program also cultivates community engagement in schools which adds that important layer of community support for education. For example, parents run arts booster clubs and provide meals at band events. Businesses may furnish art supplies or host and underwrite

When schools are engaged with their communities, they receive financial and logistical support, enriched learning opportunities for students, and hours of assistance for teachers.

field trips. A mentor might teach a young person how to make blueprints or to create marketing materials. A coffee shop could invite young people to perform live music for customers. When schools are engaged with their communities, they receive financial and logistical support, enriched learning opportunities for students, and hours of assistance for teachers.

RECENT TRENDS IN OUTCOMES

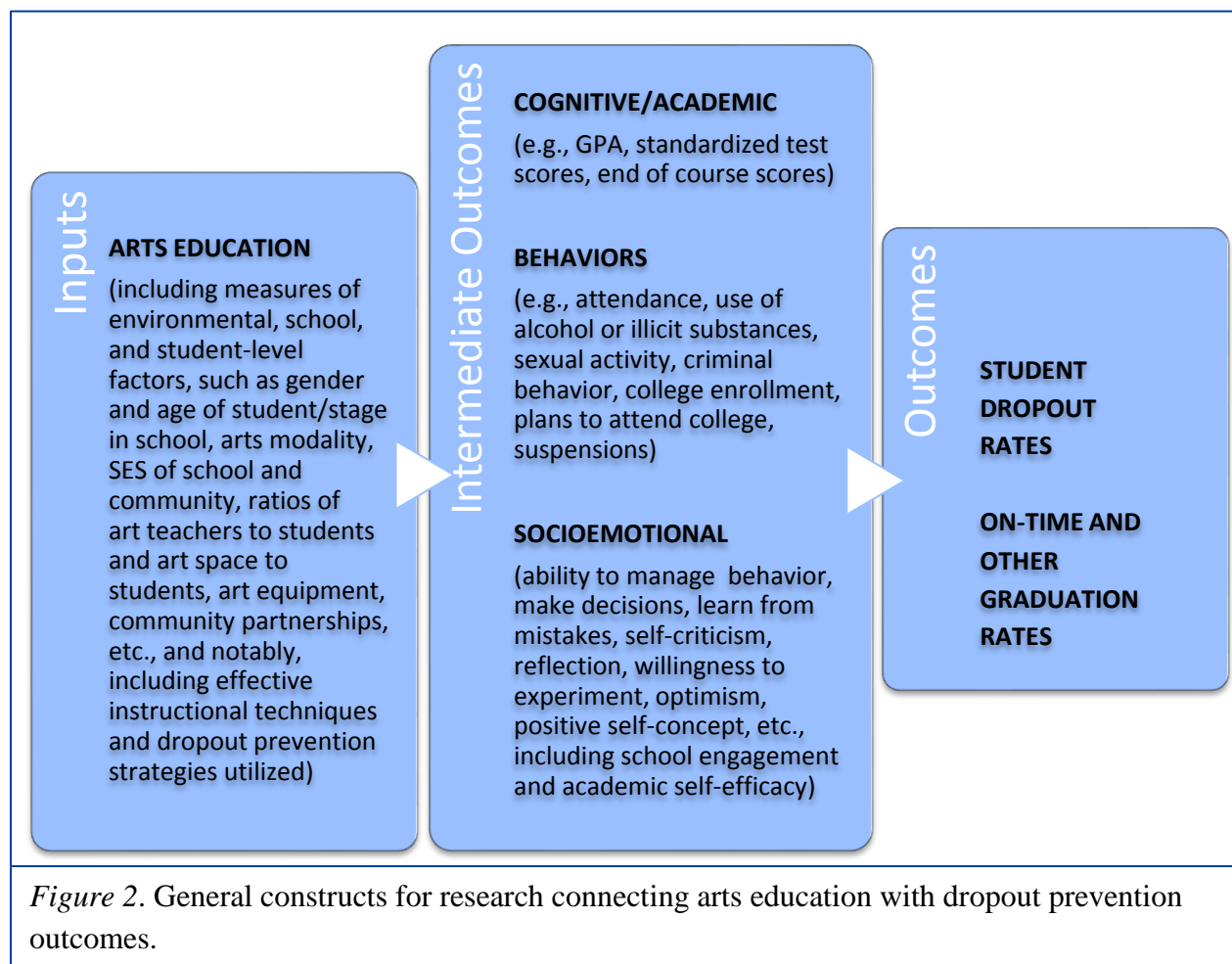
As mentioned, we know that an arts education is associated with reduced student dropout, increased GPAs, and improved performance in math and ELA. Research has expanded from reporting correlations and associations of arts education with outcomes (such as increased GPA and reduced dropout) to more frequent use of predictive research models and looking at interconnected effects. The influence of student and environmental factors (such as student and community SES, student age or stage in school, the ratio of art teacher to art student, and the mode of art studied) are now being considered along with additional student-level outcomes such as socioemotional qualities (self-efficacy and school engagement) to enhance what we know about the relationships between arts education and student performance, reduced dropout, and overall increased student success. The newer studies demonstrate the significant value of an arts education beyond its ability to boost performance in math and language arts. Because of this maturing but shifting focus in the research, and the low number of researchers examining arts and dropout prevention, these more complex trends in outcomes are just emerging and hence deserve additional focus in the future. Generally, arts education continues to demonstrate a strong, positive effect on dropout prevention, while research is more closely examining the

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underlying reasons, mitigating factors, as well as unique and additional benefits.

General constructs in the research are depicted in Figure 2. Both instructional techniques and dropout prevention strategies (in the input box) need more study and analyses. As for demographics, very little is found in the research that compares outcomes by

gender. Further, there is a dearth of studies considering how known dropout prevention strategies are incorporated into an arts education, and thus no rigorous evidence of how the strategies subsequently impact dropout when used in arts education.



CAREER PATHWAYS FOR ARTS STUDENTS

Arts students face challenges. Students with no plans beyond high school are at risk of dropping out (Charmaraman & Hall, 2011). Their visions for their futures as artists may not be clearly related to graduating, or perhaps they may consider that the art education in public school is simply not related to or valuable for what they want to do after school, if they do have some idea as to what will follow school. Clear career paths and knowledge of opportunities are essential for all students. However, formal pathways to employment hardly exist for arts students.

The statistics on the fate of postsecondary students of the arts are somewhat dismal (Jahoda, Murphy, Virgin, & Woolard, 2014). As Figure 3 illustrates, only 10% of graduates from

postsecondary arts programs are working artists (Jahoda et al., 2014), and as many as 14% are not in the labor force. More than 35% are in “Miscellaneous” and “Other” category types.

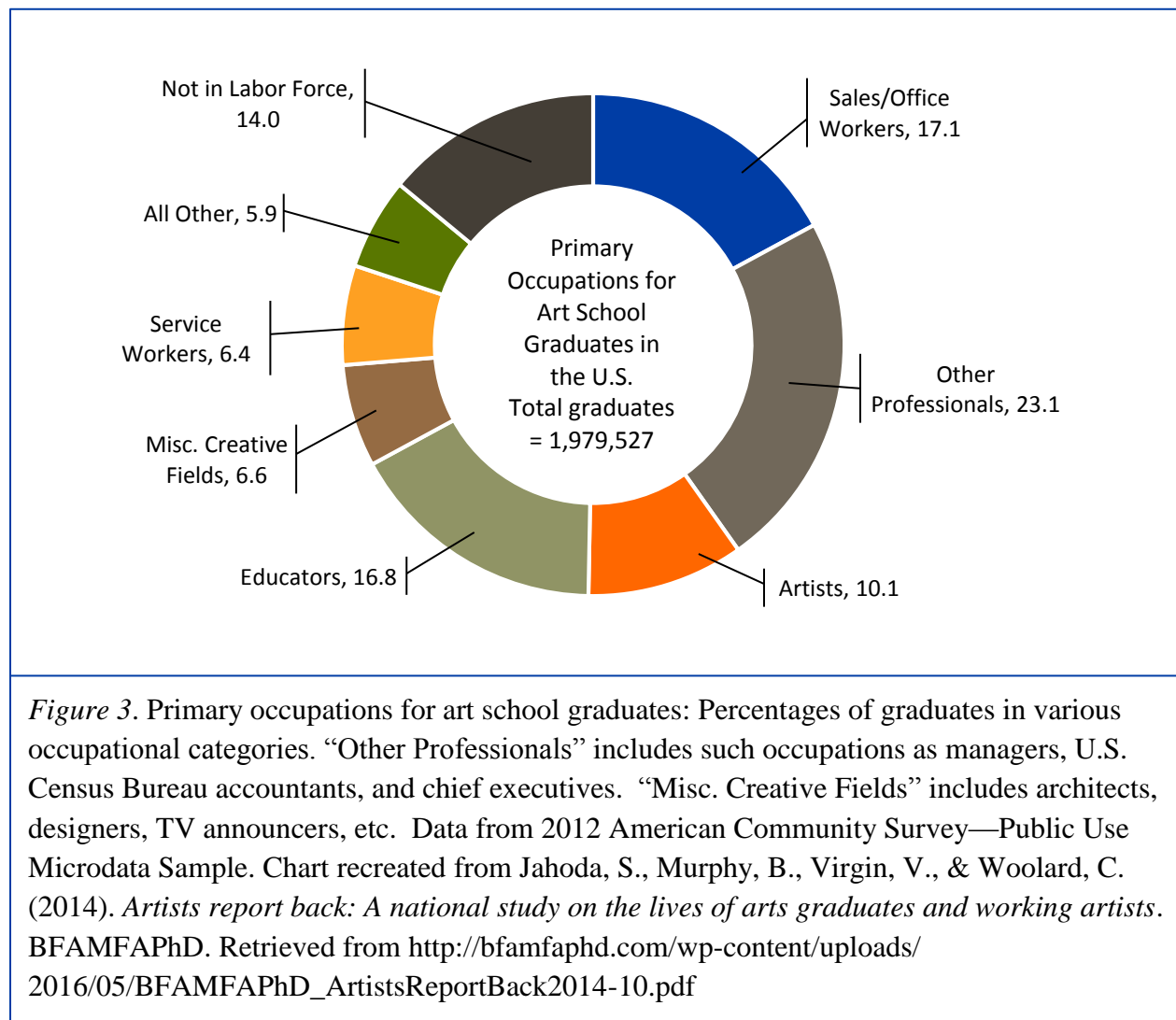


Figure 4 recreates an infographic from BFAMFAPhD, a collective of artists and others, and looks at employment of people with arts education degrees in New York City, illustrating one major city's reality of employment for postsecondary arts students.

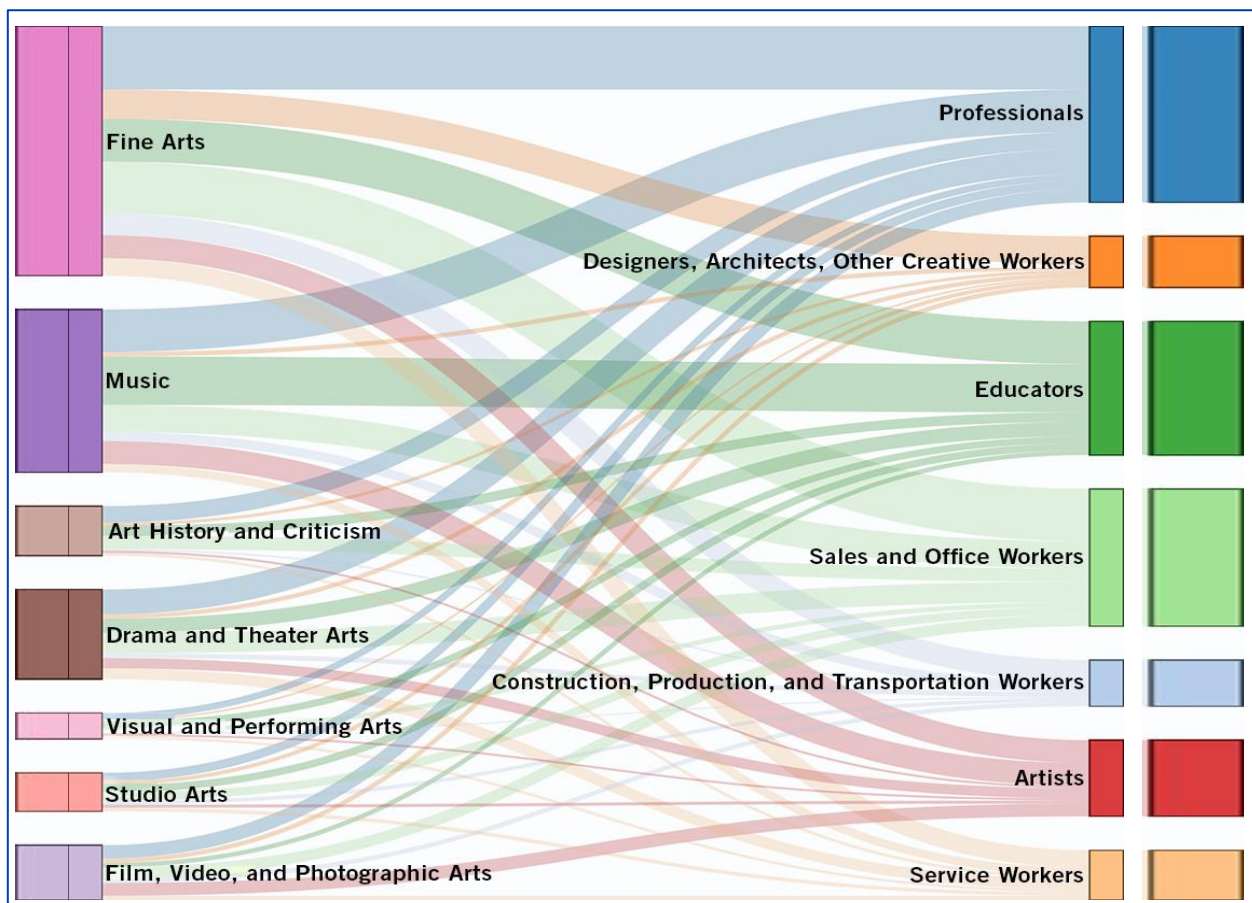


Figure 4. Most artists in New York City have nonarts-related jobs. Only 15% (pink waves from the boxes on the left to the red box on the right) make their livings as artists in NYC. Data from the Census Bureau's 2010-2012 American Community Survey. Graphic recreated from original interactive one by Boilen, J. & Virgin, V. (2014). *Census report, you* [Interactive report]. BFAMFAPhD. Retrieved from <http://bfamfaphd.com/project/census-report-rent-burden/>

So while art education can be an effective tool for student engagement and dropout prevention, it would not be right for educators to simply ignore the realities of the job market. Some good news is that art skills tend to become technical skills used in disciplines such as marketing, engineering, production, design, data visualization, architecture, metal casting, construction, and journalism, among others. However, without content knowledge of other disciplines, art students are often at a disadvantage in the job market. This is one reason why arts education must be an integral part of curriculum planning within schools and school systems. Arts education enhances many vital skills and qualities within students and for many is the hook that keeps them in school. However, the logic of encouraging arts education in order to protect

students from dropout is questionable if arts education leads to unemployment. There is a moral and practical imperative to figure out a way to change this so that arts students are prepared for future success as should be education's goal for all students.

EFFECTIVE DROPOUT PREVENTION STRATEGIES FOR ARTS STUDENTS

The National Dropout Prevention Center has identified 15 strategies known to prevent student dropout. Table 1 lists and briefly describes those strategies. While each of these strategies can be readily incorporated into most educational efforts, those perhaps most relevant and adaptable to arts education are highlighted in blue in Table 1.

Table 1

15 Effective Strategies for Dropout Prevention

Strategies	Definition
Systemic Approach	Addressing dropouts as a school, community, family, and individual, systemwide issue and using data for systemic renewal
School-Community Collaboration	Engaging the greater community in the dropout issue
Safe Learning Environments	Making schools places where students want to be
Family Engagement	Activating families to support school success/graduation
Early Childhood Education	Early programs to lay foundations for school success
Early Literacy Development	Early grade reading success
Mentoring & Tutoring	Structured and positive personal/academic relationships
Service-Learning	Service experience integrated with instructional content
Alternative Schooling	Learning differently (pace, setting, schedule, method)
After- & Out-of-School Opportunities	Instruction beyond the school day, week, and/or year
Professional Development	Educators learning at-risk student issues and strategies
Active Learning	Active (rather than passive) student participation in learning
Instructional Technology	Engaging and student-centric technology to deliver content
Individualized Instruction	Instructional methods and pace reaching students' personal learning styles and parameters
Career & Technical Education	Instruction linked to careers, the workplace, and technology

The importance of taking a systemic approach to arts education cannot be understated. First, states and districts must coordinate arts education funding, programs, pedagogy, and research so that we can understand and take advantage of its value, including how it prevents student dropout. Second, only when there is systemic coordination can pathways of education to employment be offered to arts students. That requires cooperation of state departments of education, school districts, colleges and universities, and community stakeholders. It starts with organizing a group that intends to make it happen. And with a systemic approach, the efforts must span grades levels. Art as an engaging and inspiring element of school can certainly begin very early.

Experiential learning (work-based learning, project-based learning, active learning) is another important strategy for dropout prevention that is almost imperative for arts education, and it is facilitated by community partnerships. The beauty of experiential learning is that it can be blended with other dropout prevention strategies. For example, community partnerships with museums and galleries, guest artists, mentors, businesses, medical facilities, publishers, marketing firms, higher education arts institutions or departments, etc. provide active learning opportunities through field trips, student volunteer work, service-learning, and tutoring or mentoring relationships for students. Careful crafting of experiences both incorporates multiple dropout prevention strategies and furnishes students with skills and relationships that anchor them to a tangible future, which has already been noted in itself to keep students in school.

Individualized instruction is another important dropout prevention strategy that readily applies to arts education. The creative process or practicing a performance or technique takes time. In every art modality, that process gives an instructor or section coach the opportunity to move among students providing individualized feedback. Individualized instruction is the way students improve in their art, and subsequently grow in self-efficacy and self-respect. Students may well interpret individualized instruction as care, or being acknowledged, indicating that what they contribute matters—that they matter. While we execute it through individualized instruction, caring for students' excellence is the key to engaging them, and is protective against dropout. This approach is also related to safe learning environments where students are respected for who they are, safe to be themselves, and supported in their unique sets of interests as well as in respect for others.

Finally, arts education can occur during regular school hours or during out-of-school time. Ideally all students would have access to arts education and arts education would be structured carefully and intentionally to support the skills and outcomes necessary to be successful in school and after graduation. There is more research to be done regarding the cross benefits between arts and other subject matters, but research is clear that the arts are a strong element for students and school attachment. Out-of-school programs could build upon those effects.

Arts education is a strong, protective factor in dropout prevention and in building positive character traits, attitudes, and social behaviors. As such, arts education practitioners and leaders must be included whenever dropout prevention efforts, youth engagement in school and learning, or fiscal decisions and policymaking regarding education for at-risk students are being discussed.

EXAMPLES OF EFFECTIVE INTERVENTIONS USING ARTS EDUCATION

No specific arts-centered programs are endorsed as interventions for at-risk students by the U.S. Department of Education or the What Works Clearinghouse. However, the U.S. Department of Education does fund and support arts programs that are integrated into math or language arts as well as other curricula. Those arts programs appear to be funded on a case-by-case basis.

As an organization whose mission is to prevent school dropout and increase graduation rates, the National Dropout Prevention Center/Network (NDPC/N) is interested not only in arts programs that are integrated into core curricula, but also any that increase student engagement and reduce dropout rates. One U.S. Department of Education office that supports the arts in education is The Office of Innovation and Improvement (OII). OII has a mission similar to NDPC/N's in that it strives to serve the nation's highest risk students. However, OII has most often approached the arts primarily as a means of increasing student achievement in math and language arts learning and therefore tends to fund and support arts programs that are integrated into those core subjects. NDPC/N's approach to the arts as a tool for dropout prevention is broader and allows the arts to do more for student success than just bolster academic performance. However, OII does support some model programs that are exceptional and worth reviewing by educators and leaders looking to implement arts programs. For information on some OII-funded arts programs, see <https://innovation.ed.gov/what-we-do/parental-options/>.

Media continues to highlight community efforts to engage students through the arts. One noteworthy program is The Dallas Mass Bands. It brings together students from the metropolitan Dallas area to practice music over the summer. The program not only prevents students' musical skills from deteriorating, but also keeps students engaged, teaches them how to interact with their peers, gives them purpose, keeps them out of trouble, and improves social-emotional skills. As the video and story about a band that "saves lives" from *The Dallas Morning News* (Bustillos, 2017) explains, music is almost secondary to what they are doing. We commend the many summer band and other arts programs and the tireless teachers who are integral features of this American middle- and high-school experience, keeping students involved over the summer.

Another example from music arts is The Traditional Arts Program for Students (TAPS) in North Carolina. TAPS is an in-school and after-school program that brings traditional musicians together with elementary and middle school students. Students not only learn to play the guitar, fiddle, or dulcimer but to feel the music and understand the value of continuing these musical traditions. The program engages children and invites them to be part of a regional tradition. It gives them a sense of ability, identity, place, and pride (Toe River Arts Council, n.d.).

A news report from NPR (Kamenetz, 2015) points to a large percentage of students who drop out of school due to feeling bored, frustrated, or disillusioned. In the NRP story, this process was dubbed "fadeout." The report says that to combat "fadeout," school systems like Cleveland, Ohio, have created a "portfolio model" where the thinking is that if students have access to schools that match their interests—say in the sciences or the arts—they'll stay more engaged. For example, "more experiential or outdoors or student-driven, for the artist or the

tinkerer” (Nettie Legters, a longtime dropout researcher at Johns Hopkins University, as quoted in Kamenetz, 2015). Cleveland’s graduation rates continue to rise.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The National Dropout Prevention Center/Network makes recommendations that extend to research, pedagogy, career pathways, student postsecondary choices, and policy. Arts education has potential to help our students. This potential might be leveraged by altering a few key policies and practices.

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Recommendations for Research

The National Dropout Prevention Center/Network calls for more research that goes beyond correlations and short-term observations. Longitudinal studies that include schools from lower SES communities are needed. To better identify cause and effect as well as discover trends, we also suggest that researchers include demographic, background, and environmental factors as well as cognitive, behavioral, and socioemotional factors in research models. Goals should include identification of how and why the arts stimulate and engage students toward learning; how and why the arts mediate dropout rates; as well as if, how, to what extent the arts encourage lifelong learning for students exposed to arts education more than that acquired by graduates who do not have arts education. It would be beneficial to see more research on the impact of things we can change about arts education—the inputs. In particular, much could be learned from studying the effect of dropout prevention strategies used within arts instruction. The National Dropout Prevention Center/Network could assist or advise in the development of scales to measure the degree to which dropout prevention strategies are used in a community, school, classroom, or arts discipline. Through additional research we might hope to learn the difference in the effectiveness of those strategies when they are furnished through the various arts modalities such as dance, visual arts, music, theater, or other disciplines. We also need to know how arts students’ hopes for employment (or lack thereof) influence dropout rates.

Recommendations for Instruction

The National Dropout Prevention Center/Network has identified 15 proven strategies that prevent dropout. We strongly recommend that schools, districts, and teachers implement those strategies through their arts education programs. We especially encourage a systemic approach, experiential learning, community partnerships, mentoring, tutoring, and individualized instruction. In addition, we recommend that students become involved in arts education at least by 9 years of age, when we suspect that its social-emotional influence peaks. Out-of-school and after-school arts education opportunities should be offered. The arts should also be considered as vital and integral to creating a welcoming and safe school environment. Finally, we strongly encourage arts educators at every level to increase long-term partnerships with community stakeholders (such as foundations, art galleries, artists, college arts departments, engineering and

marketing departments, and all businesses that use arts on a regular basis). Work-based learning can be especially important for those inclined toward the arts. Find experiences for students that not only expand their arts skills and knowledge, but also help them to see a realistic trajectory towards future employment using their artistic talents. Partnerships should cultivate apprenticeships and possible employment for your students.

Until such time as career pathways are more formalized and comprehensive for arts students, teachers and counselors must appropriately inform students of their education options. This goes beyond providing and discussing career guides from university arts departments. Counselors and teachers must guide and support arts students as they make and follow their individual plans leading to employment. Get involved. Student plans should begin early (grade 9 or earlier if possible) and be tied to arts in the workplace. Educators can help students build relationships that support future employment. Employment in the arts is challenging, may require education and training not directly related to the arts, and will require that educators go the extra mile to give the best possible guidance to our young people.

Recommendations for Students—Postsecondary Choices

To arts students considering colleges, look at arts degrees but also consider other degrees leading to occupations that would use your artistic skills. Do your research and talk with professionals in fields in which you may have some interest or fields you may not know much about. If you acquire a bachelor's degree in art, consider doing so at an institution where you can have a double major, take applied degree courses, or attain the prerequisites to a master's degree in an applied discipline. You will want to follow your dreams but you will want to do so in an educated and informed manner that expands (not narrows) your options.

POLICYMAKERS

Art for Those Who Need Art Most

Initial research has drawn attention to widespread inequity of access to quality arts instruction within our public schools. Without intervention, it is clear that low SES students, who are often most at risk of dropping out, are least likely to experience the protective benefits of an arts education (Catterall et al., 2012; President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities 2011; Parsad & Spiegelman 2012; Elpus, 2013). Often the arts are seen as an adjunct to the core curricular program, a nice thing to do but expendable in tough fiscal times, and difficult to integrate into core curriculum without sacrificing standardized test results. However, particularly for low SES schools and schools with too many students dropping out, arts education is not a luxury. It is a necessity. Ignoring this problem will exacerbate the divide between schools with low and high rates of dropout—schools that succeed and those that fail. We recommend that policymakers emphasize extending arts education to low SES schools and struggling students most at risk of dropping out. Integrate art into core curriculum or offer other ways for students to participate in the arts at school.

Art for Its Own Merits

We strongly recommend that arts education be considered as a singular discipline, on its own merit as a means of developing character, engaging students, and reducing dropout rates. Education should include the arts as an important part of the core curriculum, and an integral part of whole child development for students' lifelong learning and success, rather than only as a supplement or something integrated into other subjects to improve those test scores.

Career Pathways for the Arts

We also strongly urge the creation of formal pathways to employment for art students. There is much to be done in this area. Most states do not officially endorse any legitimate or comprehensive pathways for arts students. Art is not considered a CTE Perkins-approved program of study. Yet many occupations require skills that artists tend to have and skills that are enhanced through arts education. Comprehensive pathways articulated to postsecondary education and training options that lead to employment are lacking but sorely needed for arts skills. Pathways must be clarified, formalized, and widely understood by educators, employers, and students alike. We cannot allow arts education to prevent dropout only to become a pipeline to unemployment or career dissatisfaction for smart and talented young people.

CONCLUSION

Studies have shown that an arts education not only lowers dropout, but improves academic outcomes, and develops social-emotional skills. While research continues to illuminate those relationships, educators can more intentionally use dropout prevention strategies to enhance arts education and its positive outcomes. Further, we must not fail to create career pathways for students of the arts—career pathways that provide even more reason to stay in school for students confidently moving toward a bright future.

The evidence shows that schools with vibrant arts programs have more student attachment and engagement to school as well as higher graduation rates. Administrators and decision makers need to more clearly understand the role that the arts can play in addressing a wide range of educational issues. As research methodology becomes more sophisticated, and more detailed longitudinal data is available, great arts education programs will begin to reveal the how and why related to outcomes. In the meantime, we need to see the at-risk student not in an individual academic or social service silo, but rather as a whole child, with a multiplicity of needs and with unique interests and attributes. Arts educators, school administrators, and education policymakers must be at the table together when issues of dropout prevention, student engagement, and supports for all students to succeed are discussed. It is imperative and in the best interests of students and society that arts education be considered both as a key asset in dropout prevention planning and as a vital part of each child's education.

We need to see the at-risk student not in an individual academic or social service silo, but rather as a whole child.

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