

Supporting Music Education: Critical Factors for a Successful Program

If you are looking to maintain, build or expand your music program, *Gaining the Arts Advantage: Lessons from Schools that Value Arts Education* examines 13 critical factors that influence successful arts programs. Consider the following factors as a self-assessment and analyze the extent to which the following critical factors are present in your school district.

Factor 1: The Community

The No. 1 factor for creating support for arts education is community networking and involvement. In districts with strong arts education programs, the community—broadly defined as parents and families, artists, arts organizations, businesses, local civic and cultural leaders, and institutions—is actively engaged.

School administrators in these districts encourage and support:

- **active parent and community involvement** in school arts programs
- **interdisciplinary teams** involving arts educators in the development of curricula
- **arts faculty involvement** in community arts events
- **artist residencies**
- **student exhibitions and performances** for community audiences

Factor 2: The School Board

- School districts with strong arts education programs have boards of education that provide a supportive policy framework and environment for the arts. Typically, the boards:
 - **adopt written policies that value the arts** as equal to other school subjects
 - **support** the development of plans to strengthen arts education, then **allocate resources** in accordance with the plan
 - **treat arts education equally** with other subject areas if budget cuts are required
 - **consider the artistic qualities** of buildings and the needs of arts education programs during facility renovation and development

Factor 3: The Superintendent

Superintendents who regularly articulate a vision for arts education are critically important to the successful implementation and stability of the overall program.

Superintendents interviewed:

- regularly **articulate**—in writing, memos and speeches—the importance of the arts in achieving the goals of the school district
- **appoint** highly effective district-wide arts coordinators

- **develop** a shared understanding with district arts coordinator(s) about the role of arts education
- **provide support** for development and implementation of standards-based arts curricula
- **encourage education staff to collaborate** among disciplines to ensure district-wide initiatives apply to and include the arts
- **commit personal time** to meeting with the arts education personnel of their district and to representatives from the arts and cultural organizations of the community
- **attend arts events**

Factor 4: Continuity

- There is enough continuity in the school and community leadership to implement a comprehensive, long-term arts-education plan
- **Stability in formal leadership** is important in pursuing a set of education goals
- **Strong community traditions** that embrace the arts are important factors in shaping a consensus supporting arts education. School leaders told the researchers that this consensus was a key to program continuity.

Factor 5: The District Arts Coordinator

District arts coordinators facilitate program implementation throughout a school system and maintain an environment of support for arts education. Smaller districts often lack resources for a full-time coordinator, and add the responsibility to the workload of a district curriculum specialist or an arts educator at a school.

Effective coordinators play a number of crucial roles and provide several vital services:

- Arts coordinators are often the staff member most actively **engaged** with influential segments of the community that value the arts and are instrumental in **nurturing and mobilizing community support** for arts education.
- Board members credit arts coordinators with keeping “**the arts on the table**” during budget sessions.
- Coordinators negotiate between board and central office policies and school-level decision-making, an increasingly critical role as districts move toward site-based management.
- Arts coordinators often participate with school-level leadership in the **screening and hiring** of teachers.

- Teachers cite the role of district coordinator in **facilitating communication** among individual schools and in **fostering the climate of support** for arts education in the community and district.

Factor 6: A Cadre of Principals

School principals who collectively support the policy of arts education for all students often are instrumental in the policy’s successful district-wide implementation.

- Principals create **the expectations and climate** in the school building, and their support for arts education is essential. For a district as a whole to sustain the successful implementation of arts education for all of its students, a sufficient number of these **building-level leaders must personally value the arts or be persuaded by other pragmatic considerations** to make them an important aspect of the school.
- Many principals spoke of **early learning** or **involvement in the arts** or of **professional development opportunities** that helped them to decide to support arts in their schools.
- Other principals were convinced by the **effectiveness of arts education** in addressing specific issues.
- Principals looking to create **a thematically focused or interdisciplinary approach** in an elementary or middle school have found that art forms can play a central role because of their **complex content and range of activities**.
- Some principals have found that **hard-to-reach students** become **actively engaged** in the arts and, subsequently, in other aspects of the school.

Factor 7: The Teacher as Artist

Effective teachers of the arts are allowed to—indeed, are encouraged to—continue to learn and grow in mastery of their art form as well as in their teaching competence.

- The presence of arts educators in a school has proven time and again to make the difference between **successful, comprehensive, sequential arts education** and those programs in development. What the study found compelling is the **vibrancy** that teachers who practice their art bring to a program that’s already strong.
- In the strongest district, this commitment to the teacher as artist is reflected in **recruitment and hiring practices** that include auditions and portfolio reviews to assess the applicant’s competence in the art form. Experienced arts teachers in the district participate in these reviews.

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Factor 8: Parent/Public Relations

School leaders in districts with strong, system-wide arts education programs seize opportunities to make their successes known throughout the community in order to maintain support and secure additional funding.

- Principals told researchers that **parents** who never come to school for parent-teacher conferences **will come to see their child perform, creating opportunities for building relationships** important to the school and district.

Factor 9: An Elementary Foundation

Strong arts programs in elementary school years are the foundation for strong system-wide programs.

- **Elementary programs establish a foundation** in the arts for **all students**, not just for those in specialized programs or those who choose an arts course of study in high school.
- The arts have proven to be **strong components** in the adoption of an **interdisciplinary curriculum** by elementary schools.
- School leaders find, too, that beginning programs in the early years **builds relationships** with parents and community organizations important to **sustaining their support** for comprehensive arts education.

Factor 10: Opportunities for Higher Levels of Achievement

School leaders in these districts provide specialized arts programs as part of their broad strategy for securing and sustaining community support for the district's overall educational goals.

- These programs create an **environment of excellence** that challenges teachers to continue to develop proficiency in their art forms and encourages students to aspire to professional levels of performance.
- **Students** studying arts in these specialized programs expressed to interviewers their **intense pride in, and commitment to, their work**. Their achievements **contribute to community enthusiasm** for the arts and a **belief in the excellence and quality** of the district's educational system.

Factor 11: National, State and Outside Forces

Many districts in this study employ state or national policies and programs to advance arts education.

- **Policies, mandates and funding** from the state or national levels **will not, of themselves**, forge the community/school consensus required for district-wide arts education. Leaders in districts examined marshaled such forces to strengthen the consensus to support policies and programs in the schools.
- National and state standards for arts education, state education reform movements, federal funding for general school improvement or targeted programs or populations were all used to support and advance arts education in these districts.

Factor 12: Planning

School leaders in this study advise the adoption of a comprehensive vision and plan for arts education, but recommend its implementation incrementally.

- Leaders at the district and building levels repeatedly told researchers that it was important to combine a **compelling vision** of the importance of arts education with a **thoughtful implementation plan** that showed how resources would be apportioned over time to reach all schools and students.
- The **plan established confidence** among arts teachers and building-level administrators that resources would be made available.

Factor 13: Continuous Improvement

School districts that succeed in advancing arts education promote reflective practices at all levels of the schools to improve quality.

- While researchers found few districts using student assessments in the arts as part of a formal accountability system, the **strongest districts** actively encourage the **use of arts assessment** techniques for **improving student, teacher and administrative performance**.
- What researchers observed in these districts was the disposition to **reflect on and improve practice, which** is central to **improving student achievement**.

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Critical Factors: The Importance of “Informed Leadership”

- **The Community** is actively engaged within the schools.
- **The School Board** provides a supportive policy framework and environment for the arts.
- **The Superintendent** regularly articulates a vision for arts education.
- **A Cadre of Principals** – primary instructional leaders at the school level – are instrumental in supporting the policy of arts education for all students.
- **The District Arts Coordinator** facilitates program implementation and maintains an environment of support for arts education.
- **Parent/Public Relations** – seize opportunities to make your program known throughout the community in order to secure support and funding.
- **Continuity in Leadership** means there is enough continuity in the school and community leadership to implement comprehensive arts education.

Critical Factors: The Importance of “Education Content”

- **Planning:** the adoption of a comprehensive arts education vision and its incremental implementation plan.
- **An Elementary Foundation:** strong arts programs in the elementary schools are the foundation for strong system-wide programs.
- **Opportunities for High Levels of Achievement:** provide an environment of excellence and opportunity.
- **The Teacher as Artist:** teachers are encouraged to continue to learn and grow in mastery of their art as well as in their teaching competence.
- **National, State and Other Outside Forces:** state or national policies and programs are employed to advance arts education.
- **Continuous Improvement:** reflective practices at all levels of the schools promote improved quality.



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