

Right: Nashville Symphony Music Director Giancarlo Guerrero works with students at Nashville's Ravenwood High School as part of the organization's programs in public schools.

Below: As part of the San Diego Youth Symphony and Conservatory's work in the Chula Vista Elementary School District, Conductor Adam Pezdek leads the Community Opus Project's Esperanza Band in a rehearsal in March 2016.



Music Education for *All* Students

by Steven Brown

The new Every Student Succeeds Act takes a big step toward putting the arts back in classrooms. But that won't happen on its own. Now is the time for orchestras to advocate for a complete education that includes music for each and every student.



Sprawling across 103 square miles between San Diego and the Mexican border, the Chula Vista Elementary School District serves a far-from-wealthy area. Nearly half of its 30,000 students qualify for free or reduced-price lunches. Nevertheless, the district offers arts education—including music, visual art, theater, media arts, and dance—on all its campuses. That’s up from almost nothing five years ago.

Arts education is blossoming in Chula Vista. The San Diego Youth Symphony and Conservatory spurred the revival by launching an after-school program that, more quickly than anyone expected, showed district leaders how music benefits children, schools, and families. After starting with music classes, Chula Vista has been expanding its arts education ever since.

“Our experience shows us that a school district that finds value in one of the art forms will not choose to offer only that,” says Dalouge Smith, the youth symphony’s executive director. “It will take on the re-

sponsibility to offer a well-rounded education and ensure that all those subjects become part of the fabric of their district.”

Yes, arts education *can* overcome neglect. And policymakers in Washington, D.C. are giving schools across the United States new leverage in launching, reviving, or enhancing arts education. The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), signed into law last December by President Obama, eases the high-stakes testing focus on a few core subjects that marked No Child Left Behind, the previous federal education law. Giving state and local school officials fresh discretion over how they use their federal dollars, ESSA emphasizes students’ need for a well-rounded education. Not only does its list of potential components include music and the arts, but ESSA calls for a broad education to be available to all students, not just those from the best-funded districts.

“It’s a great validation from the federal government that the arts actually do matter,” says Mary Deissler, president and CEO of North Carolina’s Charlotte Sym-



Young musicians at Winterfield Elementary, a Title 1 school in a low-income east Charlotte neighborhood where the Charlotte Symphony has run a music program since 2010.

phony Orchestra. “We’ve spent so many years defending ourselves, if you will, since those awful cuts that happened in the ’80s and ’90s, when music was virtually eliminated from the public school curriculum.”

ESSA’s potential benefits won’t magically appear, though. Orchestras, art museums, and other cultural groups have to campaign for arts education’s return, Smith says. “There is no federal mandate

that all children receive music education,” he notes. “There is just a definition of what a well-rounded education is. It’s up to the local stakeholders to make sure that is fulfilled in their community.”

Making the Case for the Arts

Ratified by Congress with bipartisan support, the new law aims to correct the restrictiveness that many saw in No Child Left Behind. “While NCLB had the right goal of making sure that all students were represented in the system, it fell short in that it was a one-size-fits-all approach,” says Monique Chism, deputy assistant secretary for policy and programs at the federal Office of Elementary and Secondary Education. “The Every Student Succeeds Act still points toward high standards, accountability, and closing achievement gaps. But it provides more flexibility to states to think about their accountability systems and reform efforts.”

Education officials nationwide are working on that now. By June 2017, they have to send Washington their plans for how they’ll comply with ESSA when the federal dollars begin flowing in the 2017-18 school year, says Jeremy Anderson, president of Education Commission of the States, a nonprofit that works on education policy. “The chief school officer in each state is going to have to put together



Charlotte Symphony Orchestra

“As we look at potential new board members, we’re very interested in having an educator on the board who can represent the public schools inside the board—and be an ambassador as well,” says Charlotte Symphony President and CEO Mary Deissler.

the ESSA plan,” Anderson says, “and the governor’s office is going to have to sign off on that. So you’ve got a lot of states where the chief school officer is just starting stakeholder engagement meetings. Getting engaged in those discussions about the importance of the arts will be key.”

In Massachusetts, state education leaders have been discussing a well-rounded education since before the new law came

along, says Myran Parker-Brass, the Boston Public Schools’ executive director for the arts. She thinks a united front serves cultural organizations best. “We’re strongest when the Boston school district goes to the state [legislature] with the Boston Symphony Orchestra and Museum of Fine Arts and the Boston Ballet, and we’re all making the case together,” Parker-Brass says.

Cultural groups’ supporters ordinarily go into such meetings fired up about their art form or cause. This time, though, they should “show up with the intent of listening for what the bigger context is,” says Heather Noonan, vice president for advocacy at the League of American Orchestras. “We need to be partners in helping schools with the big goals and challenges in front of them.” Giving children equal access to quality education is one of their biggest challenges, and ESSA emphasizes it.

The Every Student Succeeds Act gives schools and communities across the United States new leverage in launching, reviving, or enhancing arts education.

President Obama signs the Every Student Succeeds Act in December 2015 surrounded by students, educators, and lawmakers.



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Advocacy efforts by the League in coordination with other national arts and education organizations pressed the U.S. Department of Education in 2012 to examine how widely arts education was available in U.S. schools. The study, Noonan says, found what one might guess: Students in the poorest districts received the least access to arts education. The department’s then-secretary, Arne Duncan, declared the imbalance “absolutely ... a civil-rights issue.” During the closing session at the League’s annual Conference in Baltimore this past June, Chism urged orchestras to confront the problem head-on. “Our job is to have honest and courageous discussions about inequality in our nation,” Chism said. “If you’re not comfortable talking about inequality—particularly in race, gender, class—then you need to get comfortable. Because our children are depending on you.”

Arts leaders who may never have seen themselves in this role can still embrace it,



Unequal access to music education is “a societal problem” running deeper than schools’ budget and curriculum decisions, says Walter Bitner, the Nashville Symphony’s director of education and community engagement, shown here during public informational meetings about the Nashville Symphony’s inaugural Accelerando program with prospective students in March of 2016.

says Lee Koonce, an advocate for diversity in orchestras and the president and artistic director of the Gateways Music Festival in Rochester, N.Y., a biennial event that spotlights classically trained musicians of African descent. Koonce points to “the business imperative”: orchestras increasingly recognize that their survival and success depend on connecting with all segments of their communities, and music education offers a gateway to groups they need to reach.

That rationale should click with any arts backer. “With all of this, you start where people are,” Koonce says. “It may be too early in the process for some to perceive of themselves as champions for equality. But I believe that orchestras can grow to that place where they see their important role in communities. Our success is actually dependent on it. The whole ecosystem of the music we love will be influenced by the children who have this opportunity.”

Taking Action for Music in the Schools

- Contact your state department of education to ask when their next public stakeholder engagement will happen as they design new education plans.
- Dedicate a portion of your orchestra’s upcoming board meeting to consider how to engage in local education-reform conversations in your school system.
- Ask your local schools and state department of education to publicly report on the status of arts education offerings in schools.
- Take a look at where your orchestra’s education programs are being delivered, and identify new ways to increase access to students.
- Consider how your orchestra can give public recognition to local in-school music teachers throughout the school year.
- Don’t go it alone! Partner with parent associations, teachers, school leaders, and other cultural organizations to improve education opportunities for all students.



Charlotte Symphony Music Director Christopher Warren-Green with a student in the orchestra’s music program at Winterfield Elementary, a Title 1 school in a low-income east Charlotte neighborhood.

Unequal access to music education is “a societal problem” running deeper than schools’ budget and curriculum decisions, says Walter Bitner, the Nashville Symphony’s director of education and community engagement. Even where music programs exist, some children can’t take advantage of them: they may lack transportation to after-school programs, or their families may be unable to afford costs such as dues for participating in marching band. “There are too many of us involved in advocacy who have seen this problem,” Bitner says. “Our school systems are no longer able to address this adequately. It is now coming to the attention of cultural institutions like the symphony orchestra, one of whose cultural roles is to make an impact in our communities. It’s becoming our responsibility to influence making this kind of opportunity available to our neighbors.”

Local Advocacy

That responsibility drew the San Diego Youth Symphony to Chula Vista. The orchestra’s leaders realized that its young musicians came mainly from affluent areas, Smith said. Bringing music education to other areas was the only solution, but the orchestra figured school leaders had to see music’s benefits firsthand before they

Every Student Succeeds Act: League Resources for Orchestras

The passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) marks an important new opportunity to ensure that every student has access to arts and music education. Now, even more of the decisions about how the arts are supported in education will be made at the state and local levels. The highest-poverty public schools currently have the least access to music education, denying many students all of the advantages that a complete music education can provide. As civic-minded community-based organizations, America's adult and youth orchestras work every day—through their programs, partnerships, and policy—to increase access to music education in our nation's schools and communities.

At the Music Education section of americanorchestras.org, find an overview of the new law, public statements to elected officials that urge full funding and support, resources to equip arts advocates at the state and local level, and next steps for orchestras to take action.

For more information, visit americanorchestras.org or contact Heather Noonan, the League vice president for advocacy, hnoonan@americanorchestras.org or Najean Lee, the League's director of government affairs and education advocacy, nlee@americanorchestras.org.

would take action. After more than a year of planning, in 2010 the group launched an El Sistema-inspired after-school program serving third-graders in two Chula

Vista schools. Teachers and principals soon began witnessing the impact. "They were seeing things like a better classroom environment, because students were act-

ing out less," Smith says. "The students seemed to have better concentration and more self-control, so they weren't being sent to the principal's office. And there was more consistent parent engagement during the school day. Parents were now feeling that they had a place on the campus, because they were so welcome to the music program."

Within six months after the program began in 2010, Smith says, school officials gave the orchestra money to expand it. The district added music instruction to the school day in 2012, then continued to add classes and faculty in theater, dance, and other disciplines. With the help of grants from the VH1 Save the Music Foundation, Chula Vista has hired 70 arts teachers, most of them full-time. The youth symphony's after-school component, the Community Opus Project, also has mushroomed.

Smith sees this as a case study in how orchestras can engage in local education advocacy, and the youth symphony is sharing its experience. In March, the orchestra will host its second national convening

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for education advocates. And it's counseling two other California school districts striving to bring the arts to their students. One of them, the Chino Valley Unified School District, started an orchestra in

"We're strongest when the Boston school district goes to the state [legislature] with the Boston Symphony Orchestra and Museum of Fine Arts and Boston Ballet, and we're all making the case together," says Boston Public Schools Executive Director for the Arts Myran Parker-Brass.

2014, after California gave local officials more authority in allocating money. "At our spring orchestra concert, I had one parent—who struggles with English—tell me that because of the orchestra program, her son was finally taking school seriously

and doing well academically. All because he loves to play the violin!" says Carol Sweat, the district's parent, school, and community specialist. "This is only one example. These are the stories that motivate us to continue on in our struggle."

In North Carolina, Charlotte's civic pride suffered a blow in 2014, when a study of intergenerational mobility (scholar.harvard.edu/files/hendren/files/mobility_geo.pdf) ranked the city 50th out of 50 U.S. regions in terms of children's chances of lifting themselves from poverty. The shortcomings included education, and that's where the Charlotte Symphony hopes to help turn the situation around. Since 2010, the orchestra has run a music program at Winterfield Elementary, a Title 1 school in a low-income east Charlotte neighborhood.

The program began with Courtney



League of American Orchestras Vice President for Advocacy Heather Noonan delivers a statement in support of access to the arts at a January 2016 meeting at Department of Education headquarters in Washington, D.C. at which the department began framing guidance for local and state policy under the Every Student Succeeds Act.

Hollenbeck, a Winterfield second-grade teacher who had enjoyed studying the violin as a youngster and thought her students would, too. Covering the expenses herself, she gathered instruments and



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The Every Student Succeeds Act “provides more flexibility to states to think about their accountability systems and reform efforts,” says Monique Chism, deputy assistant secretary for policy and programs at the federal Office of Elementary and Secondary Education. She’s shown here addressing delegates at the League of American Orchestras’ 2016 Conference.

taught the class, even though her teacher training hadn’t included music. After three years, the students’ needs began to outstrip her skills and resources, and the Charlotte Symphony said yes to her cry for help. During the orchestra’s second year in charge, Music Director Christopher Warren-Green brought the youngsters to the concert hall to join the orchestra in the opening of a subscription program. As he introduced them, Warren-Green took the long view. “This is not the future of classical music, ladies and gentlemen. It’s the future of humanity,” he said.

With the orchestra providing teachers and support, the Winterfield project has expanded to about 100 students, Charlotte Symphony Orchestra President and CEO Mary Deissler says. Seven youngsters’ talents have won them places in Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools’ arts magnet school. Hoping to duplicate the Winterfield program on two more campuses in the next couple of years, the orchestra’s education team has begun meeting with district staffers to map out plans.

And the orchestra, in light of ESSA, is ready to make its case. “We have board members who have strong political connections to our governor and legislature, and within the school community as well,”



Nashville Symphony

Nashville Symphony bassist Katherine Munagian works with students from the Middle Tennessee School Band and Orchestra Association.

Deissler says. “As we look at potential new board members, we’re very interested in having an educator on the board who can represent the public schools inside the board—and be an ambassador as well.”

The San Diego Youth Symphony, Smith says, has complemented that kind of advocacy with another: “Inviting school leaders to a concert and having them hear why the youth symphony is here. ‘Look what’s happening here.’ It was about building a shared experience and shared understanding. We took the approach of being a neighbor, being a citizen.”

Advocates can point to studies from across the U.S. showing that arts programs benefit students in a host of ways, the Education Commission of the States’ Anderson says. The Arts Education Partnership, a center within the commission, offers an overview of such research on its website, www.aep-arts.org. The advocacy and government section of the League’s

website, www.americanorchestras.org, also contains ESSA resources.

The coming months will be “a critical time for folks to get involved,” the League’s Noonan says. But arts advocates also have to look beyond the federal dollars. Washington supplies only about 10 percent of the nation’s school funding. So cultural groups also must win over those who govern state and local revenue. “The federal part is just the thin edge of the wedge that opens the door for conversations where the real resources are allocated,” Noonan says. “The main thing to do is, find out where the conversations about education are happening within your local school district and within your state. And be at the table.” **S**

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