

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

[[DATE]]

The Honorable Miguel Cardona
Secretary of Education
U.S. Department of Education
Washington, DC 20202

Dear Secretary Cardona:

We write to urge the Department of Education (Department) to make access to arts education a priority in its data collection efforts, communications with state educational agencies (SEAs) and local educational agencies (LEAs), and staffing decisions at the Department. Your leadership is vital to close longstanding gaps in access to arts education between students of color and white students, as well as between students from low-income families and wealthier students.

Arts education is central to delivering a well-rounded education to each student. Unfortunately, despite a wide body of evidence showing the academic, social, and emotional benefits of early exposure to the arts, students do not have equal access to arts education. Disparities in access to arts programming persist and have worsened in many low-income communities and communities of color across the United States. A 2009 report from the Government Accountability Office about access to arts education in the United States revealed that, although most white students did not experience declines in access to arts education from the mid-1980s to 2009, Black students experienced a 49 percent reduction in arts education programs and Latino students experienced a reduction of 40 percent during this period. A 2012 survey from the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) showed that 21 percent of families making less than \$50,000 per year reported that their child had access to art or music outside school, while 48 percent of families making more than \$100,000 per year had access to such opportunities.

Because of the precipitous, decades-long decline in arts education for students of color and students from low-income families, unequal access to the arts persists. A recent evaluation by the Arts Education Data Project of arts education access in 17 states found that Black students are more than twice less likely as white students to have arts access in their K-12 school, while Native American students were almost 10 times less likely to have access to the arts.¹ These disparities can be partially attributed to deliberate decisions to cut arts programs as a consequence of diminishing or inadequate public education budgets. These glaring inequities hold students back from receiving an excellent, well-rounded education. They also prevent

¹ https://artseddata.org/national_report_2019/

students from realizing the myriad benefits associated with early, frequent exposure to and participation in the arts. In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting social, mental, and emotional trauma and disrupted learning affecting millions of students, the arts have the potential to help students heal and recover academically. Arts education delivers benefits to academic achievement, social and emotional growth and development, workforce preparedness and marketability, and overall well-being.

We appreciate the steps the Biden Administration (Administration) is taking to expand access to the arts and humanities for all Americans, particularly those from underserved communities. We are grateful for ongoing support from the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) for arts education programs, funding increases for Title I and Title IV-A of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), and Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) pandemic relief funding from the American Rescue Plan, and the tangible effects each of those funding streams has on promoting access to the arts in our nation's public schools. Further, we are grateful that the Administration's September 30, 2022 Executive Order on Promoting the Arts, the Humanities, and Museum and Library Services pledges that the Administration "will enhance access to high-quality arts and humanities education and programming with the aim of enabling every child in America to obtain the broad creative skills and enrichment vital to succeed."²

We urge the Department to take the following near-term, meaningful steps to close gaps in access to arts education and fulfill the promise made in the President's Executive Order through better data and assessments, clearer communication with state and local officials responsible for implementing arts education programs, and engagement of senior staff at the Department. Specifically, we ask that the Department:

- 1) **Improve the collection of data and quality of national indicators for arts education, and reinstate the Arts National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP).**

Insufficient gathering of quality data and assessments reinforces inequity in arts education. The Department should commit to national indicators for arts education that include data collection regarding access to arts education and student learning in the arts, and collaborate with arts education stakeholders engaged in significant national data collection efforts. The Department's 2009–2010 Fast Response Statistical Survey (FRSS) – the most recent federal data collected regarding access to arts learning – found that schools with a higher concentration of students in poverty were less likely to offer arts education. A new FRSS for the arts, inclusion of the arts in the annual School and Staffing Survey (including demographic data and data related to teacher shortages in the arts) and other routine data collection instruments from the Department, and the reinstatement of the Arts NAEP would provide the clarity and direction necessary to reduce gaps in access to the arts.

² <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/2022/09/30/executive-order-on-promoting-the-arts-the-humanities-and-museum-and-library-services/>

- 2) **Clarify for State Educational Agencies (SEAs) and Local Educational Agencies (LEAs) that they may use Title I funds for arts education programs.** We ask that the Department issue a letter to state and local Title I Directors, Chief State School Officers and school district superintendents, state and local boards of education, and state secretaries of education specifying that they may use Title I funds and ESSER funds for arts education programs. We also urge the Department to emphasize that the arts are essential subjects of learning. The arts have been included for decades in the ESEA as core, essential subjects of learning, and they are an eligible use of Title I funds under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). Without written clarification from the Department, many local and state educational agencies are reluctant to use any of their Title I and ESSER allocations to implement arts education programs. The most recent letter of this kind was issued by the Department in 2013, and prior letters were issued by former Secretary Arne Duncan in 2009 and former Secretary Rod Paige in 2004.

- 3) **Reinstate leadership positions at the Department to advise on the arts and arts education.** The Department maintains several small grant programs for arts education, but there is currently no leadership or advisory position for arts education experts who can help fuel innovation in areas beyond the relatively narrow focus in these programs. Department staff with specific arts education expertise can provide guidance regarding arts data collection and arts learning strategies relevant to the implementation of ESSA programs, such as Title I, Title II, the Assistance for Arts Education Fund, Title IV-A Student Support and Academic Enrichment resources, and the 21st Century Community Learning Centers Program. Such staff members could also incorporate the arts to the Department's various programs encompassing civil rights, special education, English language learning, Career and Technical Education, and the White House Initiatives, with an emphasis on equity. Further, we encourage Department leadership to continue actively engaging with the Arts Education Partnership in collaboration with the National Endowment for the Arts, which serves as a hub for arts and education leaders across the country.

We appreciate your consideration of our requests regarding steps the Department can take to ascertain the scope and scale of, and ultimately close, gaps in access to arts education around the nation. We look forward to your timely response and to our continued work together to increase opportunities for all students to receive an excellent, well-rounded education that includes the arts.

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