



THE SOCIOEMOTIONAL BENEFITS OF THE ARTS:

A New Mandate for Arts Education

A SUMMARY REPORT

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WHY DOES IT MATTER IF STUDENTS RECEIVE AN EDUCATION IN THE ARTS?

One answer enshrined in public policy is that the arts are part of a “well-rounded education”.* Just as we would consider a student’s education incomplete without English Language Arts or science, **we should regard an education without the arts as incomplete.** One factor that may contribute to reduced school and life success among low-income students is their

* Every Student Succeeds Act, p. 807

reduced access to arts education, which limits opportunities to build socioemotional skills, including an understanding that skill results from practice, failure, and recovery, not raw talent. Socioemotional skills are central to school and life success (Farrington et al., 2012; Zimmerman, 2002) and therefore an education that does not feature the opportunity to develop these skills is not well-rounded.

WolfBrown, an arts research firm, collaborated with Johns Hopkins' Science of Learning Institute, and a cohort of the William Penn Foundation's Philadelphia-based arts education grantees (see Appendix), to define the impact of arts education programs on students' socioemotional skills. This report offers a brief summary of this research.  [READ THE FULL REPORT HERE](#)



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SECTION 1: **CONTEXT**



ROCK SCHOOL FOR DANCE EDUCATION

When young people are placed ‘at risk’ by poverty, they often lack the experiences and opportunities that might foster socioemotional learning, such as sustained relationships with trusted adults outside their families, quality informal learning situations, experiences that consistently challenge them to excel, and safe environments in which to explore. Through no fault of their own, these students have fewer opportunities to acquire a set of skills that are critically important for success in school and life, including the ability to manage behavior and make effective decisions, strategies to form and maintain a positive self-concept, and the capacity to interact productively with others.

Learning these socioemotional skills may occur in many contexts (e.g., family discussions, team sports, or classroom interactions) but a growing body of research suggests that the arts offer a particularly fertile context in which this type of learning may occur. For example, overcoming successive challenges through sustained effort is a part of learning to practice any art form, but it is also one way in which students may build perseverance. Similarly, gradually mastering a particular artistic technique, developed in a context of specific forms of positive feedback, may help students to develop implicit theories about how they grow and learn.

As schools that serve children in poverty have become increasingly focused on transmitting a discrete set of academic skills, the opportunity for socioemotional learning through arts education has also become less frequent, even to the point of absence (Parsad & Spiegelman, 2012). The reasons

for this shift are many and varied, and include the proliferation of high-stakes testing, the competition for 'elective funds' (Beveridge, 2010), and the mechanisms through which schools are funded. But two consequences of this shift are clear:

- the opportunities for socioemotional learning through the arts are distributed unevenly by income, and
- given the associations between socioemotional skills and school success, the uneven distribution of these opportunities further disenfranchises students already disadvantaged by their families' socioeconomic status.



SECTION 2:

EVALUATION



SAMUEL S. FLEISHER ART MEMORIAL

To examine the impact of arts learning on students’ socioemotional development, we first had to define socioemotional learning in the context of this study. We began by reviewing the research literature on the relationship between arts education and socioemotional development. Then we held conversations with the leadership of arts education programs, in which we asked about the specific domains of socioemotional development that they believed their programs were most likely to influence. Based on these conversations, we developed a list of socioemotional domains that might be unique to the experience of arts education—as opposed to those that could result from extra-curricular activities more broadly, such as athletics—but that were *not* likely to be specific to a single arts discipline.

From this initial work we formulated three broad research questions:

1. Can arts education programs foster students' socioemotional development in areas more directly related to the arts?

Here we include areas that are not conventionally counted as aspects of socioemotional development, but that nevertheless align to commonly-accepted components of the term. These are:

- interest in the arts, which is an aspect of self-awareness
- tolerance for others' perspectives
- awareness of and appreciation for other cultures

Both tolerance for others' perspectives and awareness of and appreciation for other cultures are aspects of social awareness and, in the case of tolerance, relationship skills.

2. Can arts education programs foster socioemotional development in areas less directly related to the arts?

- perseverance: willingness to exert sustained effort in the pursuit of their goals
- school engagement: involvement and interest in school
- growth mindset: the belief that one's abilities can be developed, rather than being fixed
- academic goal orientation: motivation to succeed in school
- academic self-concept: how one sees oneself in an academic context
- academic self-efficacy: beliefs in one's capacity to succeed in school

3. Can arts education programs foster socioemotional development in areas of artistic self-awareness such as artistic goal orientation, self-concept, or self-efficacy?

This third question was driven by a particular gap in the literature: ironically, less is known about whether arts education programs might influence areas of artistic self-awareness, such as artistic goal orientation, self-concept, or self-efficacy. For example, it is not known whether a program of music education might influence how students see themselves in the context of music, or impact how confident they feel regarding their ability to learn about music. Given this, we included measures of students' artistic goal orientation, self-concept, and self-efficacy among our measures, aligned in each case to the artistic discipline(s) in which instruction was offered. However, we administered these measures only to older students (i.e., those in high school), as we judged that these students would be most capable of distinguishing between academic and artistic contexts.

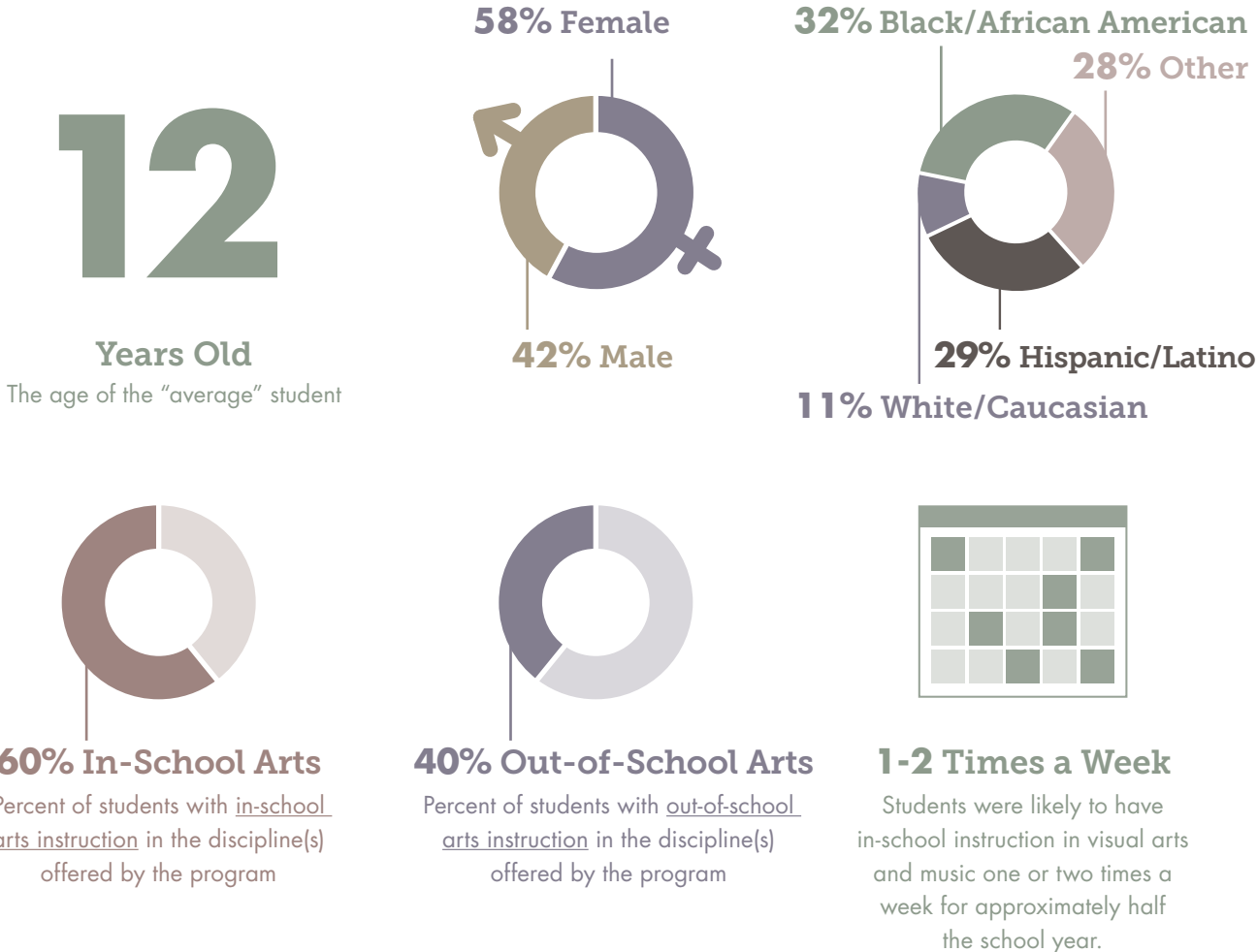
METHODOLOGY:

To address these questions, we collected data from nearly 900 students. Whenever possible, students were assigned at random to either a treatment or control group prior to data collection. When this was not feasible, a comparison group was recruited from students enrolled in the same classroom(s) and grade(s) as the treatment group students. Students were asked to complete a set of surveys that assessed their socioemotional development in the areas listed above prior to and following their participation in the program, or, in the case of students in the control or comparison groups, before and after an interval of time equal to the length of

the program. Students' primary in-school teachers were asked to complete measures of school engagement and perseverance according to the same schedule.

When completing their surveys students were also asked to indicate their date of birth, gender, race/ethnicity, and whether they had ever had in- or out-of-school instruction in the artistic discipline(s) offered by the program in which they would be enrolled. Students' primary or homeroom teachers were also asked to provide information regarding the arts instruction their students would receive in the coming year.

Sample Student Demographics collected at the time she or he completed the pre-program study are shown here. For additional detail on the composition of the sample, see Appendix on page 13.



We also assessed each program using an observational measure that assessed both the quality of instructional practice with respect to socioemotional learning and the nature of students' responses to these practices. This measure yielded scores for six broad dimensions of socioemotional practices with a separate score for staffs' input and youths' responses.

SECTION 3: **FINDINGS**



SPIRAL Q

Our results indicated that program participation led to modest increases in students' interest in the arts. This finding is notable given the range of our sample in terms of artistic discipline, the intensity or dosage of instruction, and the diversity of the students those programs served. It suggests that even relatively-brief, compulsory programs of arts education can kindle students' interest in the arts.

All remaining effects (e.g., growth mindset, tolerance for others' perspectives, school engagement) were contingent upon factors related to the students served, with two factors exerting particularly potent influences:

1. Student Age: Arts education was more strongly related to positive socioemotional outcomes for younger students in areas directly related to the arts as well as areas that are less closely related. Younger students (with an average age of approximately 9 years) who participated in an arts program exhibited increases in their tolerance for others' perspectives, and in the less closely-related areas of growth mindset (the belief in their ability to develop their skills) and academic goal orientation (their motivation to succeed in school).

2. Socioemotional Development Prior to Program Participation: Across ages, students with particularly high scores for certain areas of socioemotional development before participation realized a disproportionate benefit from arts education. For example, students who reported high levels of school engagement prior to participating in an arts program maintained these high levels of engagement. In contrast, students who had similar initial levels of engagement but who did not participate in an arts program demonstrated sharp decreases in school engagement. A similar pattern of findings was observed for academic self-efficacy, or students' perceptions of their capacity to succeed in school.

Our analyses also indicated that program factors like arts discipline or the length and intensity of the program did not impact student outcomes, despite the fact that there was substantial variability in discipline, dosage, and intensity of explicit practices focused on socioemotional development. This may mean that in a sample of very diverse students, student factors such as age are a more powerful influence on what a program can achieve.

CONTRIBUTIONS



MURAL ARTS PHILADELPHIA

Students, teachers, and schools from across Philadelphia contributed their time and energy to this study, while administrators and teaching artists displayed patience and flexibility in allowing information to be collected about their programs. This collective effort has generated new information about the value of the arts, and new ways to understand what arts education may offer to children and youth.

This study makes three contributions to the field of arts education:

1. New knowledge: The study contributes new knowledge to the field. The results presented here indicate that arts education programs can foster socioemotional learning, but that these effects are most likely to be observed among younger students and students exhibiting high levels of socioemotional development prior to program participation.

2. New tools: The project contributes new tools to the field that can be used to continue to generate knowledge in the future. The survey measures administered to students and teachers in this study produced reliable data across an array of socioemotional domains, and can be expected to do so again in the future, while the observational measure will allow researchers to assess program practices designed to achieve outcomes across multiple areas of socioemotional development.

3. New equity: It is the context in which these contributions were made that is perhaps the most important contribution of this study. Prior to this study, our understanding of



ASTRAL ARTISTS

the effects of arts education on socioemotional development was based largely on evidence collected from children who are more affluent and demographically homogeneous than those served by the schools in this study. In addition, with some exceptions, the measures available to assess socioemotional development were created with less diverse groups of students. It is only by investing in the creation of knowledge about more diverse samples of students—as well as the measures necessary to generate this knowledge—that we can begin to address how the inequitable distribution of arts education enhances some children’s lives, and constrains what other children learn, experience, and see as possible for themselves.

APPENDIX

STUDY PARTICIPANTS

Organizations that partnered in research, enabling WolfBrown and Johns Hopkins to collect data on their arts education partnership programs:

1. Al-Bustan Seeds of Culture
2. Astral Artists
3. Koresh Dance Company
4. Lantern Theater Company
5. Mural Arts Philadelphia
6. Musicopia/Dancing Classrooms Philly
7. Opera Philadelphia
8. Philadelphia Young Playwrights
9. Rock School for Dance Education
10. Samuel S. Fleisher Art Memorial
11. Settlement Music School
12. Spiral Q
13. Taller Puertorriqueño
14. Walnut Street Theatre
15. Wilma Theater

STUDY SAMPLE COMPOSITION

	Overall (N = 892)		Treatment (N = 462)		Comparison (N = 430)		Difference	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	t (df)	p
Age (in years)	11.93	2.85	11.54	2.42	12.35	3.21	-4.04 (793)	< .001
Gender	n	Percent	n	Percent	n	Percent	X ² (df)	p
- Female	480	57.9	241	60.9	239	55.2	2.72 (1)	.057
- Male	349	42.1	155	39.1	194	44.8		
Ethnicity	n	Percent	n	Percent	n	Percent	X ² (df)	p
- African American	264	32.2	139	35.6	125	29.1	19.8 (6)	.003
- Latino/Hispanic	238	29.0	103	26.4	135	31.4		
- Asian/Pacific Islander	43	5.2	29	7.4	14	3.3		
- Native American	9	1.1	4	1.0	5	1.2		
- Caucasian/White	87	10.6	38	9.7	49	11.4		
- Mixed	80	9.8	26	6.7	26	6.7		
- Other	99	12.1	51	13.1	51	13.1		

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For more information about the study,
including a complete description of
its methodology and findings,



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