

Arts, Education, and Leadership: Powerful Network or Tangled Web?

Are we building something that will ultimately draw dollars and time away from our children and their arts education?

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The 21st century movement toward less didactic and more collaborative education for our next generation has been especially focused on the place of the arts in learning. As our schools and community partners work to redesign the classroom with more experiential opportunities, we are also redesigning the shape of leadership and resource delivery to serve these new environments.

As the director of a state-level service organization for arts education, I am trying to determine whether the changes are good or not.

It *is* good that with popular emphasis on the holistic, simultaneous, contextual, imagistic, and intuitive characteristics of artistic or right-brain function, the arts are seen as an ally to education. Historically, arts and education communities have been allies when they found themselves on the bottom of the funding ladder together. They shared an identity that appeared to take more from society than it could give. That was *not* so good.

What is *not* so good is that we may be forgetting that many of our people are already well-connected artists, educators, and leaders in their schools or organizations.

To seize current opportunity and make use of our shared potential, schools, cultural organizations, policymakers, funders, and individuals are using consortia to surround arts education with leadership at all levels and through many perspectives. There is a strengthening of national, professional networks to do this.

- The [Arts Education Partnership](#) (AEP) hosts gatherings that highlight examples of applied research and that motivate new research to be pursued.
- The Americans for the Arts [Annual Convention](#) and [web communities](#) integrate arts education into other conversations of national artistic concern.
- The [National Association of State Arts Agencies](#) (NASAA) maintains a network for decentralization of funds and trends through state arts agencies to individual artists and organizations.
- The US Department of Education (USDOE) [funds and disseminates model program outcomes](#) through support of regional laboratory models that are then linked to Americans for the Arts, AEP, and NASAA advocacy measures.

On the local level, when a teacher turns to our agency seeking dollars for an artist residency, we require that teacher to establish a collaborative relationship with an artistic partner. We also recommend that s/he

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attend some of our local Arts Education Roundtable sessions, write a letter to a legislator on a current issue, and invite him/her to attend a statewide policy and professional development conference for arts integration and resource development. We want her to be an advocate, a leader, and an excellent practitioner. This seems to be good, even bountiful, because there was a time when such consortia and delivery systems did not exist.

What is *not* so good is that in our excitement to distribute leadership and to give the power to the people, we may be forgetting that

many of our people are already well-connected artists, educators, and leaders in their schools or organizations. Many of the coordinators of the roundtables, decentralization, and professional development organizations report that they have low attendance, low follow-through from participants on out-the-door tasks, minimal data or responsiveness to surveys.

In the state of New York we have an intricate, beautifully maintained arts in education leadership network that has been carefully nurtured under the leadership of the [New York State Council on the Arts](#) (NYSCA). The elements of this framework include:

- Web portals that guide individuals to the resources available for their discipline, region, or special area of need.
- Decentralized state arts council grants (24 county-assigned sites) for arts integration partnerships titled “Local Capacity Building.” These grants allow for local leadership and panels that can serve varying needs of rural, urban, and suburban communities.
- Local arts education roundtables (12 region-assigned sites) for general, ongoing technical assistance and professional development such as access to experts, research, referrals, and match-making.
- Multi-year arts integration grants known as Empire State Partnerships that require intensive fund matching, professional development, partnership practice, evaluation, and dissemination of best practice. This is administered by the state arts council.
- “Regional Leadership and Learning Networks” are also regional consortia specifically for long-term arts integration partnerships that have been funded by the state.

- One annual statewide conference called “CommonGround” that for more than 30 years has been serving teachers, artists, cultural organizations, and schools in policy shaping, networking, and professional development. This is administered by my organization.
- One statewide summer institute that is required for state grant recipients. This seminar series features a model for reflecting on and refining best practices in long-lasting partnerships.
- Many small regional conferences, advocacy, and professional development events that are administered by the NYS Alliance for Arts Education and other state wide education and arts associations.

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What is not so good is that this leadership development in every corner of the state sometimes appears to be large and time-consuming leaving little time for applying expertise to the classroom, to the studio, to our arts in education partnerships. The huge acronym soup of resources has been kindly dubbed the “EIEIO” network. Newcomers to the NY State arts in education community do require some convincing when it appears that a large percent of grant dollars and time are devoted to maintenance of the network and not as evident in the residency budget for teaching artists, performances, supplies, etc. That teacher who comes to us for a little grant is sometimes a victim of our own success when she walks away with her arms full of choices and inspiration and forgets what she came looking for in the first place.

The remedy in our state for the moment is a careful and sensitive system of checks and balances. Because we do have an abundance of empowered artists, educators, and leaders for arts education, we are better able to be self-critical, to be wary of quick fixes and easy solutions. We can share forecasts along that network and best predict our next strategies for richer learning and juicy creativity.

So the question remains: when we look to the national level and hear the cries for more conferences, more consortia, networks, blogs, websites, newsletters, gatherings, you-name-its—are we going to be prepared to manage this wealth of leadership? Or are we just building something that will ultimately draw dollars and time away from our children and their arts education? Thought-leader [Daniel Pink](#) has reminded us that creativity is a more critical commodity when we are in an era of abundance. If we can own that abundance and keep the web of information and connections focused, then perhaps we can actually advance the place of the arts in the 21st century classroom as essential.



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