

## PROJECT BRIEFING: ARTS FOR THE SCHOOLS, BY THE SCHOOLS



Demonstration site mural at Sanchez Elementary School

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Dale S. Rose, Ph.D.  
3D Group

Frances Phillips  
The Walter and Elise Haas Fund

## BACKGROUND .....

In 1991, a group of dedicated arts funders in San Francisco assembled as the Arts Education Funders Collaborative (AEFC) with the intent of collectively contributing to advancing arts education in the San Francisco Unified School District (the district). Through focus groups with teachers and school administrators, they heard that district schools serving younger children had the smallest arts education budgets and that they lacked good information about external arts programs and services that could assist them, money to invest in such services, and teachers who were experienced in and comfortable with teaching the arts.



Demonstration site student artwork at Junipero Serra CDC

After a decade of publishing a guide to arts services (the book and web site *Inside/Out*), producing professional development workshops for teachers in elementary schools and child development centers, and awarding small (~\$3,000) grants to participating elementary schools, the AEFC heard from its steering committee of artists, school and arts commission representatives, that a bolder effort was needed. While research from around the country pointed to beneficial results of arts in various schools and districts, the steering committee strongly believed that school board and school and district leaders would not be swayed to invest more in arts education until positive change in school environments could be demonstrated in San Francisco.

Responding to this charge, in 2001 the group pooled additional resources and established a four-year demonstration site program at what were intended to be three district elementary schools or child development centers. Each of the grantees was to receive substantial support (approximately \$10,000 for a year of planning and \$50,000 per year for implementation) over four years with the hope that this level of support and investment of time would allow the schools to create deep, lasting change in support of the arts. (Please note that the term “schools” is used in this paper to describe both child development centers and elementary schools.)

This was a risky endeavor but undertaken deliberately. At a basic level, AEFC was curious to learn how schools would set priorities and spend funds that were dedicated to arts education. Schools in the district had considerable autonomy over their budgets, and few prioritized spending money on the arts. Many hired multiple outside arts organizations to offer events and short-term residencies. At the same time, many of them were involved in school reform efforts that were highly prescriptive. The collaborative hoped that if participating sites had opportunities to develop arts programs of their own designs—that addressed the needs of their students, teachers, and parent communities—the resulting arts program would advance their overall goals, and the schools would be committed to sustaining them.

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Outside of this collaborative project, many of the participating grantmakers awarded most of their arts education funding to external arts organizations that were serving the schools rather than to the schools themselves. Some of these arts organizations worked closely on planning arts programs with school leaders, but such planning was not

assured. As a consequence, the funders were concerned that much of the capacity for planning and implementing the arts in schools was being retained in outside organizations.

A further issue that shaped the demonstration program was recognition of the often-echoed concern from grantees that individual grants rarely provide sustained support of an adequate size to achieve lasting results. For the demonstration program, the collaborative’s grants, while not enormous, were of a substantial size and were continued over multiple years.

By directly funding the schools for four years, the AEFC hoped to: (1) build schools’ internal capacity for planning and delivering arts education, (2) provide high quality arts programming at each site (3) encourage the schools to value arts education and find ways to fund it themselves.

Requests for proposals were issued to the district's elementary schools and child development centers. AEFC asked applicants for program proposals that: (1) addressed long term sustainability, (2) developed concentrated sequential arts instruction in multiple disciplines, and (3) occurred during the regular school day, not after school.

## EVALUATION .....

The AEFC also engaged an evaluation team (3D Group) to follow the schools through the four years and evaluate the programs' effectiveness based on the goals each site chose for itself. The evaluation team developed a framework called the School-Health-Index (SHI) for looking at the schools broadly to assess site-wide impact. This model uses an ecological approach to school functioning, recognizing that learning is embedded in a dynamic school context where interactions between persons and the school environment shape student learning.

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The evaluators assisted each of the four schools in developing its program goals. After goals were established, measures were selected that addressed each site's goals and also allowed data to be combined into a unified evaluation. Measures included student attitudes about school, student creativity, and teacher/parent/staff attitudes about the schools. These were collected through interviews, and systematic observations of arts programming. Student achievement on statewide standardized scores was included as a whole-site measure (though none of the sites listed improving student test scores as a goal for the arts program). Using the same evaluation model for all schools allowed evaluators to look at the demonstration program as a whole. The challenge with this method was that each school had identified up to 30 goals, limiting the possibility of achieving an in-depth site-specific evaluation.

## IMPLEMENTATION .....

Although the demonstration site program intended to support three schools, several of the applying child development centers were very small and, ultimately, AEFC selected four varied sites within the San Francisco Unified School District—two small child development centers and two mid-sized elementary schools—with the two centers sharing a grant. Selection was based on the schools' previous experience with the arts and potential for improvement, a cohesive proposal with a chance at sustainability, and strong, stable leadership.



Demonstration site mural at John McLaren CDC

The schools used the first year for planning and designing their programs. Planning involved intensive half-day working sessions facilitated by the evaluator with as many as 10 teachers and the senior administrator (principal or site director) from each school. These sessions focused on building logic models for the programs with program activities linked to specific goals. Several months after these initial sessions, another round of sessions was conducted with another facilitator to further the schools' plans for their programs. Additionally, the evaluator worked with each site after the second year to narrow its focus and prioritize objectives for the program.

Though all of the schools eventually developed complete arts programs, their progress during the initial planning year was slow because school staffs were unaccustomed to being given so much free rein to determine program design: They looked to the funders for guidance on what the program plans could and should contain. It took some time

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for them to sort out what to do without narrow guidelines. Another element that slowed progress was that only one of the schools had on-site arts specialists who could provide clear professional guidance regarding arts-based curricula. Over time, and with much encouragement from the funders and the evaluators, these concerns faded and each site established a program that fit the grant's goals for multi-disciplinary, sequential arts instruction.

During the second through fourth years, schools tested their program plans, many of which were very ambitious. Each school had developed its own set of goals and the schools' goals varied widely. Most identified goals focused on parents, students, and teachers. One site listed more than 30 objectives for its arts program, ranging from students "becoming problem solvers and creative thinkers" to "increasing teachers' confidence and competency."

As expected, some schools thrived during implementation while others struggled to manage a host of changes including transitions in leadership and key staff and balancing time demands from the new program with district pressures related to student standardized test performance. Two of the four sites changed leadership during the implementation period (one retired, one resigned); one site lost its director during the first four months of the program due to illness; and one of the sites lost the original author of the grant when she moved out of state. Perhaps the most disturbing event occurred at the very end of the project when the school with the greatest success with its arts program was closed by the district and merged into another elementary school. This campus had built its own sequential arts-based curriculum, delivered very high quality staff-wide teacher development, and established several arts-specific facilities for both visual and performing arts.

## WAS THE FUNDING STRATEGY EFFECTIVE? .....



Demonstration site student artwork at Swett Elementary School

As hoped, all of the demonstration sites developed school-wide programs for the arts. After the grant ended, most of the sites were not able to replace the level of arts support contributed by the AEFC, but because of the programs they had created with AEFC funding, they did succeed at winning other grants. Also, parent involvement improved at all of the participating sites, particularly at the Child Development Centers. The arts created many opportunities for parents to engage with their children's educations, and School Health Index measures of parent involvement showed steady increases over the four years. Other positive findings were that parents and staff at the schools rated their physical spaces, available resources and student attitudes as improving slightly but steadily over the four years.

The quality of the arts programs was not consistent at all of the sites and even within each site it varied from year to year. All of the schools struggled to some degree with how to maximize the grant resources. Although the arts programs had incremental, positive effects at each location; nothing related to the arts program could be linked to dramatic improvements in student achievement, student attitudes about school, or standardized measures of creativity.

Clearly, during the four years the arts became a consistent part of the educational experience at each school in a way that likely would not have been possible without substantial, sustained support. All sites developed new expertise in the arts and came to see arts as an important part of the school curriculum and arts-related events as valuable for community building. It is too soon to tell about the long-term effects. Certainly all of the schools gained a greater appreciation for the value of the arts and they found ways to invest in sustaining their programs (including using their grants from the AEFC for capital purchases, such as kilns, and professional development for teachers; and using school arts events as the focus for grassroots fundraising).

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The AEFC could not have known at the outset that at the end of the project, the district would have adopted an Arts Education Master Plan and that new public funds, awarded by the city government through the district and from the California Department of Education's budget, would position all of the District's schools to increase their arts education investments. The AEFC demonstration grants did not bring these changes; however, having spent four years learning how to use significant arts funding, each of the remaining demonstration sites is in a strong position to make good use of new arts resources and their experiences can inform their colleagues on other campuses.

## WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED? .....

Providing schools significant support for a long period can be an effective method for “jump starting” their arts programs but some important pre-conditions should be considered. Organizational capacity was critical to the success of these grants. Leadership continuity and styles, teacher engagement, and institutional stability strongly influenced the relative success of the project. The degree of expertise in the arts at each school influenced the amount of time it took to get the program running at a high level. The sites that were best suited for developing a program independently benefited most from the grant and those with limited institutional capacity and arts expertise had more difficulty.

3D Group and the AEFC recommend the following points to consider when awarding arts education grants directly to schools and CDCs:

1. Having an application process rather than hand-selecting the sites was beneficial because it forced them to begin planning early and it helped the funders assess institutional capacity. Becoming a demonstration site required hard work on the part of the grantees and participating schools had to recognize their own readiness and eagerness for the task.
2. In addition to assessing stable leadership, grantmakers should consider leadership styles when selecting grant recipients. Leaders who limit staff-wide involvement and decision-making can hamper a program’s development (and leave it vulnerable if they move to a different job).
3. If funders choose to maintain a “hands off” approach to program design, they need to anticipate some floundering on the part of sites during early stages of project planning. Providing schools with a neutral consultant early on could make the planning more efficient and effective.
4. Funders should articulate and publish their understanding of what “high quality arts education” looks like and plan to work with the schools throughout the application, planning, and implementation process to build a shared understanding of “quality.”
5. During planning, schools may set goals indicating their arts programs will “do everything” and need help focusing on realistic outcomes that clearly link to specific program elements.
6. Funders should assume that sites will encounter needs for technical assistance and be prepared to supply it above and beyond the grant funds awarded for arts programming.
7. Schools should assign a designated arts coordinator who is responsible for program implementation and who is deeply involved in planning. Likewise, funders should provide a project coordinator to sustain contact with each grantee and provide referrals to arts-resources and advice.
8. Leadership change will happen in schools and CDCs. The “arts team” at each site should include more than one person with some authority.
9. Grantees should be invited and encouraged to revisit their program plans when a major change takes place at the campuses or in their external environments.
10. The four-year approach was a good one. Even when schools were wobbling, the funders stuck beside them and, ultimately, some that looked as if they were going to fail, ended up producing good results.
11. Having a structured but broad direction for the grant program, such as “build a sequential arts curriculum that is sustainable and is delivered during regular school hours” allowed each school to create a distinctive program but also significantly expanded the resources needed for evaluators to provide rich site-specific developmental feedback and to focus on cross-site outcomes for funders.
12. Investing in building camaraderie among the grant recipients proved to be worthwhile. At informal, annual celebrations with the four schools, they were eager to share resources and ideas and support one another’s efforts—an unanticipated, lasting benefit.