

Engaging Senior Leadership to Advance Arts in Schools

An examination of Los Angeles County's *Arts for All* 2009-10 Leadership Fellows Program

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PREFACE

The Los Angeles County Arts Commission has been actively engaged in examining and advancing arts education in the County for more than a decade, starting with the 2001 publication of *Arts in Focus*, the first-ever survey of arts education in Los Angeles County, and the launch of *Arts for All* in 2002.

Established by the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors, *Arts for All* is a dynamic, County-wide collaboration working to create vibrant classrooms, schools, communities and economies through the restoration of all arts disciplines into the core curriculum for each of our 1.6 million public K-12 students in 81 school districts. In working with school districts and our additional partners, we continue to learn much about what it takes to achieve sweeping transformation in our schools. As we become more deeply involved in the implementation of arts education in school districts, new revelations continue to surface.

The school district leaders who took part in the Fellows Program described in this monograph found that the opportunity to talk to one another about leadership in arts education was invaluable. Similarly, *Arts for All* hopes that this publication will become a focus for dialogue. In our work we have discovered that many big issues, such as how to recognize and talk about the quality of arts instruction, are rarely discussed. We would like to change that.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

GOALS & BACKGROUND

The impetus for *Arts for All's* Leadership Fellows Program was a brainstorming session in July 2008 on how best to move the *Arts for All* collaborative toward its goal of restoring arts education into the core curriculum for each of the County's 1.6 million public K-12 students. Session participants repeatedly circled back to *Arts for All's* need to engage school district leaders in order to be successful.

The goal of the program, the first of its kind in the country, was to increase the capacity of school district leadership to advance quality, access and equity of arts education within their respective school districts.

RESEARCH & PLANNING

To inform the creation of the program, *Arts for All* undertook a School District Survey in 28 school districts that had committed to working toward *Arts for All's* goals. Through in-person interviews with key arts education stakeholders, the survey determined how decisions regarding arts education are made within the school districts. The survey yielded key findings:

Shared responsibility is vital for success:

The school districts making the most progress were those in which leadership team members had a sense of shared responsibility, used a common language to discuss arts education programs and trusted one another.



Arts for All's Vision:

Every public school student in Los Angeles County will receive a high-quality K-12 education of which the arts are an intrinsic part of the core curriculum. Each County school district will acknowledge that exposure to and participation in the multiple arts disciplines:

- strengthens a child's academic growth and development as an individual;
- prepares the child to feel a part of and make a positive contribution to the community; and
- ensures a creative and competitive workforce to meet the economic opportunities of the present and future.

Thus, sequential instruction in the multiple arts disciplines will be scheduled into the school day and included in the budget of every County school district.

**The role of the assistant superintendent:**

The assistant superintendent is essential to implementation because s/he has the authority to set a standard in which the arts are viewed with parity in relation to other subjects. S/he is also responsible for hiring the arts coordinator, arts education specialists and, in many cases, school principals.

The need for data collection:

Very little quantitative data on arts education is being collected. District leaders need to be equipped with tools and techniques to do this in order to advocate for and expand arts education programs.

School districts education foundations are increasingly important to arts education efforts:

The most successful *Arts for All* school districts had an independent nonprofit education foundation that raised funds to support a variety of initiatives and leveraged school district investment.

THE LEADERSHIP FELLOWS PROGRAM

Of the 28 districts that were studied, five were chosen to participate in the program and were asked to assemble a team of the superintendent, assistant superintendent and arts coordinator. Seven sessions held between October 2009 and May 2010 followed a thematic arc:

- Why is high-quality arts education important?
- What does it look like?
- How can it best be implemented?

The sessions included a mix of large-group activities and discussion and breakout sessions, typically in job-alike groups. Outside speakers were included in four of the seven sessions to offer their perspectives on quality arts education, integrating arts into the general curriculum, or scaling up successful programs to the district level. Halfway through the program check-in sessions with individual school districts took place.

Program benefits:

Aspects of the program that participants found most beneficial included the opportunity to engage in a powerful dialogue about the elements of quality arts instruction and build a network of professional friends interested in improving the quality of arts pro-

grams; a site-visit to a charter school featuring arts integration throughout the curriculum, which allowed participants to see what high-quality instruction looks like on the ground; and the check-ins at school districts which allowed additional leaders to participate and discuss specific implementation issues.

Impact and actions taken as a result of the program:

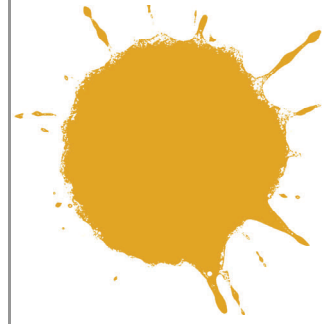
- Stronger working relationships within each district team
- A shift in focus from increasing the quantity of arts instruction to also increasing its quality
- More interest in arts integration
- Better informed school district leadership
- A common language to talk about arts education
- Stronger advocacy and recognition that senior administrators need to take a more active role as leaders in support of arts education
- Arts being more central in school district planning
- Deeper and more consistent discussion with critical stakeholders, such as school board members, about the state of district arts programs
- New partnerships with arts organizations for professional development
- New thoughts on how to maintain and improve programs and manage fiscal constraints

Conclusions and looking ahead:

- Collaborative efforts to improve arts education must include high-level school district leaders.
- Tension exists between district leaders' aspirations for equity across schools and the tradition of deferring to school-site level decision-making. Future programs should examine how district-level decisions can advance arts education on a more consistent and equitable basis.
- Future programs should maintain a thematic focus on quality but highlight concrete models of shared delivery.
- *Arts for All's* future programs for district leaders will target assistant superintendents with teams of up to five key school principals from each district. These programs will be delivered regionally across Los Angeles County.

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GOALS & BACKGROUND

Arts for All's Leadership Fellows Program grew out of a July 2008 brainstorming session with *Arts for All's* Executive Committee, which guides its activities, and staff. The Executive Committee came together to discuss how the findings of recent school district case studies could inform future work. The case studies had been commissioned earlier that year so *Arts for All* could better understand how the resources it provides school districts had impacted the first 11 districts that joined *Arts for All* from 2003 to 2005. The case studies highlighted that while these first 11 districts had succeeded in adopting arts education policies and plans and appointing arts coordinators, their progress in implementing those plans varied. The support and influence of school district leadership was key to success. Action – or lack of action – on the part of senior leaders had a critical impact on the school district's ability to move toward fully including the arts in its core curriculum.

As the brainstorming session progressed, participants repeatedly circled back to *Arts for All's* need to engage school district leaders, and to better understand how key decisions about arts education were being made at the district level. As a result of that session, the *Arts for All* Leadership Fellows Program was proposed as one of many programs to increase quality, access and equity of arts education in Los Angeles County. Thanks to The Wallace Foundation's generous support, the program came to fruition in the 2009-10 school year. This report shares what *Arts for All* has learned about school district leadership and leadership development toward building and sustaining arts education.

Goal of the program

The goal of the program, the first of its kind of in country, was to increase the capacity of school district leadership to advance quality, access and equity of arts education within their respective school districts.

The hypothesis guiding the design of the Leadership Fellows Program was that district-wide arts education reform is only possible if school district leadership is informed of and deeply engaged in the process. By increasing leaders' understanding of and capacity to implement high quality arts education, *Arts for All* hoped to ensure the arts would not be the first to be cut in times of economic difficulty.

RESEARCH & PLANNING School District Survey Project

In order to design the Leadership Fellows Program, *Arts for All* staff first undertook a study to determine who in *Arts for All* school districts makes decisions with regard to arts education. Given the number of individuals involved in implementing arts education (superintendents, assistant superintendents, arts coordinators, principals, board members, community members, etc.), staff needed to identify the source of greatest influence and authority within each school district. The study was also an opportunity to get a snapshot of each school district's progress at that moment in time.

The School District Survey Project focused on 28 school districts — those that had joined *Arts for All* in its first five years (2003-2008) and had developed Board-adopted arts education policies and plans by the time the survey began.

Goals of the project

- To identify key decision-makers within each school district and better understand how decisions about arts education were being made at the district level



- To identify which school districts to invite to participate in the Leadership Fellows Program
- To learn additional information to inform *Arts for All* and how it could better support arts education implementation efforts across the school districts

Methodology

The Arts Commission contracted with five outside “investigators” to interview key arts education stakeholders within each of the 28 school districts. It intentionally selected education professionals who were familiar with *Arts for All* and who had experience working with school district leaders:

- Dr. Kathy Duba, former Deputy Superintendent and Chief Academic Officer of Pasadena Unified School District;
- Kathi R. Levin, independent consultant and former Director of the Kennedy Center Alliance for Arts Education Network;
- Pamela Paulson, Senior Director of Policy at the Perpich Center for Arts Education and licensed Superintendent;
- Dr. Alexis Sheehy, retired Deputy Superintendent of Burbank Unified School District, and
- Dr. Ira Toibin, retired Superintendent of Palos Verdes Peninsula Unified School District.

The design of the study was based on the research methodologies of investigative journalism. The goal was to “get the story behind the story” of arts education within each school district.

The investigators were asked to interview at least five people who were key arts education stakeholders within their assigned school district. Each was required to interview the superintendent and the district arts coordinator (or position equivalent) using a structured interview protocol. The objective was to gather standardized information from the two people typically perceived as most fundamental to leading and managing arts education at the school district level. During these interviews, the investigators worked with the superintendent and the district arts coordinator to identify and prioritize three other key influential leaders to interview within the school district or the community.

Preparing and supporting the investigators

Conference call convenings

Prior to the school district interviews, *Arts for All* staff convened the investigators via conference call in order to explain the purpose and goals of the School District Survey Project and respond to questions. They convened again midway through the process to share how the interviews were going, and for a third time after completing the interviews to discuss possible formats for a one-day Leadership Forum during which they would report out on their findings. The conference calls provided an opportunity for the experts to discuss their work in terms of school district access, use of the interview protocol and their sense of how the process was working. Individual outcomes and findings were not discussed during these conference calls, but rather saved for the Leadership Forum, when *Arts for All* staff and Executive Committee would be present.

Materials provided to investigators

- Profiles of each school district assigned to the investigator
Profiles included contact information for the superintendent’s office and the district arts coordinator (or person serving in this capacity), district demographics, the number of schools in the district, the year(s) when the district joined *Arts for All* and adopted its arts education policy and plan, links to that policy and plan, and a list of possible candidates for additional interviews
- Interview Protocol
- *Arts for All* overview materials including *Arts for All: Los Angeles County Regional Blueprint for Arts Education* (updated 2004), *Arts for All 6th Year Review* (October 2008), and *2008 Arts Education Performance Indicators (AEPI) Report*
- *Arts for All: The Vanguard Districts. Case Studies from the First Five Years*
- Summary sheet framework
Summary sheets were provided for investigators to reflect upon their findings. These summary sheets were meant as tools for the investigators and were not submitted to the Arts Commission.

Inviting school district participation in the project

The Arts Commission sent a letter to the superintendent of each of the 28 *Arts for All* school districts to be included in the survey, announcing the study and the Leadership Fellows Program. The letter came from Dr. Darline P. Robles, then Superintendent of the Los Angeles County Office of Education and member of the *Arts for All* Executive Committee.

To honor arts coordinators' pivotal role in ensuring *Arts for All's* success, *Arts for All* staff convened a meeting to inform them of the study before the letter was sent. As the primary ongoing liaisons to *Arts for All* staff, arts coordinators were instrumental in garnering support for completing the survey. *Arts for All* staff emphasized that arts coordinators would each be interviewed, and asked that they think about who else should be interviewed from their school districts and communities. They also assured arts coordinators that the study was focused on leadership, and was not meant to be an evaluation of each school district's arts education program.

Data gathering and collection

Oral documentation and reporting

Oral reporting was the primary method of data collection. The interviews were structured as conversations, mostly conducted over the phone and lasting approximately one hour. Several investigators based in the Los Angeles area conducted some of their interviews in person.

In order to gain support and trust from the school district leaders, the investigators made clear to interviewees that no written summaries or documentation identifying individual school districts would be submitted to the Arts Commission. This assurance of anonymity was vital to gathering candid information and perceptions from interviewees. While the investigators took notes during individual interviews, these were strictly for their own use so that they would be able to recollect their conversations when reporting out on their findings.

Interview protocols

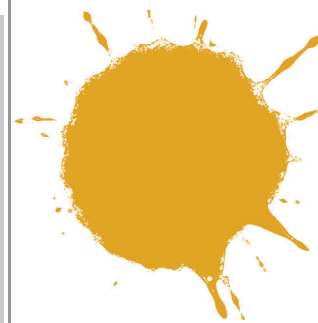
Investigators used an opening script to ensure a consistent introduction for each interview:

"I have been contracted by the Los Angeles County Arts Commission to research the Arts for All initiative as a way to better understand the leadership structures in the Arts for All school districts. I am not recording this call and I am not expected to create a written report of what I have learned. As part of this survey project I am going to be interviewing several other people in your district. Your perspective is one of many I would like to hear. All information is being captured and shared orally. Your input will be kept confidential and anonymous and will be used for internal purposes only by the Arts for All team so they can better support Arts for All districts in the future."

Investigators were provided with three protocols: one for superintendents and assistant superintendents, one for arts coordinators, and one for other key leaders (principals, teachers, school board or community members, etc).

The interview protocols were provided to the interviewees in advance of their conversations with the investigators. The questions were designed to focus the conversations on the status of each district's arts education programs at that moment in time, rather than to create an historical profile of their efforts or a survey of the content of these programs. In addition to determining who was making decisions in regards to arts programs within the districts, the investigators were asked to get a sense of the community context and demand for arts education. They were also asked to get a sense of how the budget cuts superintendents were considering in response to the economic downturn might impact arts education programs.

With regard to the school district's partnership with *Arts for All*, the leaders were all asked about what additional support they would like in implementing their arts education plans, and their level of interest in participating in the Leadership Fellows Program. They were also asked for any additional information they might provide about leadership challenges regarding arts education.





Leadership Forum

Arts for All staff anticipated that the School District Survey Project would yield a wealth of information on the 28 school districts, and decided to host a full day meeting for the investigators to report their findings and discuss them with staff and the *Arts for All* Executive Committee.

Goals of the forum

- To learn about the leadership dynamics of the 28 *Arts for All* districts
- To select the five sites and five alternate sites to invite to participate in the Leadership Fellows Program
- To identify recommendations about the format and content of the Leadership Fellows Program
- To reflect on the meaning of the School District Survey Project in terms of its broader impact on the development of *Arts for All*

Forum structure

Above all else, the Leadership Forum was designed to be a conversation about the findings between the investigators and *Arts for All* leadership.

The agenda for the day was three-part:

1. Conversational sharing of the stories the investigators had uncovered about the leadership dynamic and current status of implementing the arts education plans in each of the five sites they had surveyed
2. Selection of the primary sites and alternate sites to invite to participate in the Leadership Fellows Program
3. Reflection on the approach, content and framework of the Leadership Fellows Program, and general discussion of additional insights and recommendations derived from the School District Survey Project

Because no written material was submitted by the investigators, the day was intended to be as interactive as possible, with the dialogue driven by the attendees' evolving understandings of the school districts as common findings and themes began to emerge.

Survey outcomes and findings

As the investigators shared what they had learned through the interview process, several findings emerged as noteworthy not only for *Arts for All* but for the arts education field both locally and nationally. These findings strongly influenced the design of the Leadership Fellows Program.

Shared responsibility is vital for success

The *Arts for All* districts making the most progress were those in which the leadership team had a sense of shared responsibility for arts education in their respective school districts. In many cases, the *Arts for All* planning process was a crucial first step in creating that sense of responsibility. Many school district leaders expressed that their school boards' adoption of an arts education policy and plan signaled a collective belief in the importance of arts education in the curriculum – reinforced by the fact that *Arts for All* plans are developed by Community Arts Teams rather than by individuals. School district leaders perceived that once the plans were adopted by the board, arts education was institutionalized within the district curriculum, enabling them to collectively move past the need to “defend” arts education and instead focus on implementing it.

Senior leaders within these school districts conveyed a sense of “speaking in one voice” when it came to the district's position on the importance of arts education. Strong leadership teams had a clear understanding of their interrelated responsibilities, a common language for discussing their arts education program and trust in one another. A clear understanding and healthy respect for the value of everyone's role on the team made it more likely that the work would continue even if a key player moves on.

The role of the assistant superintendent

Perhaps the most striking finding of the study is the essential leadership role that the assistant superintendent (often having the title of assistant superintendent of educational services or curriculum and

instruction) brings to ensuring that the arts are present within the school district.

Because s/he oversees approved curriculum across the school district, s/he has the authority to set a standard in which the arts are viewed with parity in relation to other subjects – even those typically given the most attention in standardized testing.

Assistant superintendents have personnel responsibilities as well. They are generally responsible for hiring and supervising the arts coordinator. They have a role in hiring arts education specialists and determining their placements. Even more importantly, many hire and supervise school principals, allowing them to monitor whether the school district's arts education plan is being implemented at the classroom level. Assistant superintendents also have input into scheduling professional development and allocating resources — all core aspects of a successful implementation effort. An assistant superintendent who understands the value of arts education for all children is central to leveraging resources to ensure they have access to high-quality instruction. In addition, many go on to be superintendents later in their careers – making their understanding and valuing of the arts all the more important.

No one is collecting data

The study made it clear that very little, if any, quantitative data on arts education, including basic enrollment figures, is being collected in *Arts for All* school districts. Where data is collected, it is not being tracked in ways that enable data-driven decision-making. School district leaders are using anecdotal and observational data to monitor the implementation of their arts education plans. Several individual teachers and/or principals are doing their own assessments of arts education programs, but nothing has been institutionalized at either the school or district level.

School capacity for developing and implementing assessment of student learning in arts education programs is limited. One of the most effective ways to leverage the existing expertise and commitment of district leaders is to equip them with tools and techniques to collect the data they need to continue to advocate for and expand their arts education programs.

It must be noted that since the Leadership Forum, *Arts for All*, in its role developing

tools for school districts, has made important progress in arts education data collection with the *Arts for All School Arts Survey: Measuring Quality, Access and Equity in Arts Education*. The survey was developed to measure access to and quality of arts instruction at the school site level and to provide a system for collecting and reporting the data. The survey and data collection-reporting system proved themselves in an initial test in five school districts. The results are useful to schools and school districts to find out what is working and not working, and point the way toward improvement. The results can also provide a picture of arts education trends happening across a region. A summary of the *School Arts Survey* is available on http://www.lacountyarts.org/pubfiles/SummaryQAE_SurveyResults_2011.pdf.

School district education foundations are increasingly important to arts education efforts

Many of the most successful *Arts for All* school districts had an independent non-profit education foundation to support a variety of initiatives including arts education. Other *Arts for All* school districts are in the process of creating such foundations or are considering doing so.

In those school districts with education foundations, arts education is often considered a positive platform for launching fundraising efforts. Education foundations also provide a venue for community members who are interested in arts education to join together and build more support for arts programs. School district leaders expressed concerns, however, that an active education foundation might “let the school district off the hook” and discourage the district from allocating resources from its own budget for arts education. They also raised questions about who controls how programs are implemented and which get funded once an education foundation is involved.

In school districts that are successful in leveraging the support of the education foundation to implement arts education, the foundation's senior leaders often serve on the school district's community arts team (the team that collaborated to develop the school district's arts education policy and plan) or other ongoing advisory group for arts education. In these instances, the foundation lead-





ers are very knowledgeable about arts education and support the arts education plan adopted by the school board. The foundation's resources are targeted strategically (leveraging matching financial contributions from the school district's general fund, for example), so that sustainability becomes central to all phases of implementation.

It is important to note that education foundations are typically associated with school districts that serve high or relatively high wealth communities. As state and federal funding sources continue to be reduced due to the economic crisis, this has implications regarding the equity of access to arts education from one school district to another. Recognizing the need to gain deeper understanding of how local education foundations support the arts and which communities they serve, *Arts for All* is conducting a countywide analysis of local education foundations that will be released in summer 2011.

Selection of school districts to participate in the Leadership Fellows Program

Because the Leadership Fellows Program would be a pilot during the 2009/10 school year, the school districts' level of interest and readiness to participate in the program was central to the selection process. The *Arts for All* Executive Committee also wanted a mix of school districts of varying size and with different challenges and successes in arts education implementation. It was also important to select one school district from each of the five Los Angeles County Supervisorial districts.

The Wallace Foundation grant also provided funding for two related programs, one in advocacy training and the other in the collection of data on quality, access and equity of arts education at the school site level. Each of these related programs were also to be piloted in five school districts. During the Leadership Forum, participants discussed the pros and cons of "stacking" all three pilot programs within the same group of five school districts, or spreading them out among three groups of five. In the end, participants decided that concentrating services within the same five school districts would be most efficient given the natural parallels between the programs, and would yield the greatest results.

After the Leadership Forum, the following 5 school districts were invited and subsequently agreed to participate in the *Arts for All* Leadership Fellows Program, and related pilot programs in advocacy training and data collection:

- Burbank Unified School District
- Culver City Unified School District
- Montebello Unified School District
- Paramount Unified School District
- Santa Monica-Malibu Unified School District

To further incentivize their participation, the five school districts were eligible to apply for a \$10,000 grant at the end of the program to address a gap in quality, access or equity of arts edu-

THE LEADERSHIP FELLOWS PROGRAM

Participants and content

The findings of the School District Survey informed the design of the program in a number of ways. First and foremost, the content was geared toward assistant superintendents, not superintendents, as the key agents of change. Secondly, given the survey's emphasis on shared responsibility and well-aligned leadership for arts education, each school district was asked to assemble a team consisting of the superintendent, assistant superintendent, and arts coordinator to go through the program. These three were chosen because they were widely seen as having the greatest influence over the progress of the school district's arts education plan. The hope was that the program would provide an opportunity for those three leaders to come to renewed common understanding of how to work together to advance arts education.

Mark Slavkin, *Arts for All* Executive Committee member, Vice President of Education for the Music Center, and former president of the school board of the Los Angeles Unified School District, and Dr. Ira Toibin, retired superintendent and one of the five School District Survey Project investigators, served as the co-facilitators for the Leadership Fellows Program. Identifying one facilitator from the arts world and one from the education world was a key design strategy and factor to bring validity to the program.

There were seven sessions from October 2009 to May 2010. The co-facilitators worked together with *Arts for All* staff to prepare the content of each session. The seven sessions were designed to follow a thematic arc:

- **Why** is high-quality arts education important?
- **What** does it look like?
- **How** can it best be implemented?

The report *The Qualities of Quality: Understanding Excellence in Arts Education*, research by Steve Seidel and his team from Project Zero, Harvard Graduate School of Education, was released shortly before the Leadership Fellows Program began and was used as a key text throughout the program.

In general, the sessions included a mix of large-group activities and discussion and breakout sessions, typically in job-alike groups. Outside speakers were included in four of the seven sessions to offer their individual perspectives on quality arts education, integrating arts into the general curriculum, or scaling up successful programs from the school to the district level. Each session was a half-day with the exception of the check-in sessions with individual school districts (see below) that took place halfway through the program.

The breakdown of topics covered in each session was as follows:

Session 1: Creating a group statement on why arts education is important, and introducing the four lenses of quality (student learning, pedagogy, community dynamics and environment) identified in *The Qualities of Quality*

Session 2: Looking at videos of arts instruction from each school district using the four lenses, and beginning discussion of quality arts integration

Session 3: In-depth exploration of quality lenses with Steve Seidel as guest facilitator

Session 4: Examining a case study of a fictional school district determining how to move forward with arts education in light of budget cuts; further discussion of district-wide arts education using Culver City USD as a model example

Session 5: Meetings with individual school districts to provide more targeted technical assistance and identify further topics to be covered during the remaining sessions; school districts requested models of successful arts integration methods

Session 6: Site visit to Para Los Niños Elementary School, a high performing charter school that features arts integration throughout the curriculum

Session 7: Final group reflection





Program evaluation and results

Methodology

After the sixth session of the Leadership Fellows program, two focus groups were held at the offices of the Arts Commission. All five arts coordinators participated in one focus group conducted by Susan McGreevy-Nichols, an associate of the Griffin Center for Inspired Instruction. Lynn Waldorf, the Executive Director of the Griffin Center and principal program evaluator, interviewed one district superintendent and three assistant superintendents in the second group.

All nine focus group participants also completed a paper version of a 15 item post-survey at that time and two additional superintendents and an assistant superintendent completed an identical online version. In total, 12 of the 15 Leadership Fellows participants, or 87%, completed the post-survey, providing a representative sample. Each of the respondents reported having attended at least 75% of the scheduled meetings.

Program benefits

Program participants highlighted a number of aspects of the program they found to be particularly beneficial.

Quality instruction

Participants reported that sharing experiences and ideas, engaging in powerful dialogue and building a network of professional colleagues interested in improving arts programs were major benefits of the program. Steve Seidel's *The Qualities of Quality* report and associated discussions and exercises on defining characteristics of quality arts instruction were named as particularly useful. The arts coordinators discussed using the report and its findings in framing curriculum, instruction, and the professional development of teachers, while senior administrators also talked about using it to reflect on the overall quality of their district arts education program. Both groups reported having recreated the quality arts instruction exercise with other administrators and teachers.

Arts integration

Arts coordinators and senior administrators also named the site visit to Para Los Niños and seeing integrated arts learning in action as highly valuable. The visit brought arts integration alive in the classroom and allowed participants to consider how it could be effectively implemented in other sites.

Addressing barriers to arts education implementation

Having *Arts for All* staff and Leadership Fellows program facilitators visit each school district and engage in reflective dialogue regarding its unique assets and challenges was also noted as helpful, especially when the dialogue focused on tackling a specific issue in arts education implementation. Both art coordinators and senior administrators cited the opportunity to include other district leaders in these conversations as beneficial, particularly to support a more cohesive approach to arts education planning and implementation, and to create more connections with other instructional programs and policies.

Program impact

In discussing how the program impacted their work within their school districts, participants reported:

- Stronger working relationships within the team
- New focus on quality of instruction
- More interest in arts integration
- Better informed school district leadership
- A common language to talk about arts education
- Stronger advocacy
- Arts being more central in school district planning

Changes in perception about the participants' district arts programs

Two arts coordinators reported their role in the school district seemed to be taken more seriously, and that they were able to bring more attention to arts education topics during administrative meetings than in the past. One reported a stronger sense of partnership

with senior administrators and more interest and momentum around the *Arts for All* collaborative and implementation of the school district's arts plan. Based on additional remarks from senior administrators, this sense of partnership between arts coordinators and assistant superintendents was likely a result of spending more one-on-one time together driving back and forth to the meetings, engaging in discussions centered around arts education during various program activities, and developing a stronger common language and understanding about the place of arts education in their district.

Another shift in perception mentioned by all focus group participants was from a sole focus on increasing the quantity of arts instruction to also increasing its quality. This was attributed to Steve Seidel's report and his presentation to the Leadership Fellows participants. For one assistant superintendent, the aim of organizing a school arts production became no longer just about putting on a performance, but rather to provide a strong learning experience to students.

Both groups also brought up the fact it would be very difficult, if not impossible, to achieve the goal of offering K-12 sequential instruction in all four art forms to all students in the near future. Based on this realization, the focus of district arts plan implementation shifted toward increasing the quality of existing programs and rethinking arts integration as a critical strategy to increase arts learning during the school day. For some arts coordinators, the visit to Para Los Niños to see arts integration in action underscored and validated their own work with arts integration in recent years, particularly in districts operating with few or no arts specialists at the elementary level. The program verified that though each district was moving at a different pace and had different strengths and challenges, they were all headed in the right direction.

One senior administrator reported realizing that s/he needed to take a more active role as a symbolic leader in support of arts education, that public stakeholders are looking for that leadership, and that more could be done to build momentum with school boards since program participants had been given concise ways to report on and advocate for arts education.

Actions taken as a result of participating

Both the arts coordinators and the senior administrators reported using *The Qualities of Quality* with curriculum leaders, principals and arts teachers to inform on-going discussions about what quality looks like in an arts program or in a student learning experience. Several cited use of the report in the Leadership Fellows Program as the strongest element of the entire series. They viewed reading and using the report as effective professional development because it raised their level of understanding about how to approach concepts of quality in arts instruction; they were then in turn able to use discussion exercises with district staff and faculty.

Both groups also reported increased discussion with critical stakeholders, such as school board members, about the information gained through the Leadership Fellows Program and about the state of the district arts programs. A senior administrator explained that the program had changed the way the leaders talk about arts education with their school board, and that they now do so on a more timely and consistent basis. With a clearer sense of direction from internal arts education meetings, the administrators stated they had new thoughts about how to maintain their progress arts education to date, how to manage limitations of scope that arise from fiscal constraints, and how to improve the arts programs they currently have.

Another practical outcome mentioned was new partnerships with the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA), which hosted one of the Leadership Fellows Program sessions, resulting in a new professional development program for teachers in one district and a collaborative federal grant proposal in another. In addition, at least one coordinator planned to use the understandings gained from the school site visit and accompanying arts integration materials as key guides in their work with schools. Senior administrators reported feeling more informed about *Arts for All's* mission and goals, and they are now being more strategic in thinking about arts education and including it in the school district master plan. Finally, one administrator is now seeking out support and resources inside the district to help drive the implementation of the arts plan forward.





Program ratings

In general, survey respondents gave all aspects of the Leadership Fellows program highly positive ratings. The highest marks were given to three aspects of the program:

- Knowledge about what high quality arts education really looks like (82% rated this as very valuable)
- New resources, materials and models of arts education (82% rated this as very valuable)
- A unique opportunity to deepen and strengthen the implementation of arts education in my district (73% rated this as very valuable)

Suggestions for the future

All of the participants in the focus groups strongly urged that the Leadership Fellows Program continue in some format for the 2009-10 attendees and liked the idea of other *Arts for All* district leadership teams joining as well, with separate meetings or break out sessions to address participants' different needs.

Specific topics to cover

Leadership Fellows participants identified two central questions they would like to see addressed in future programs:

1. How can we integrate the arts across the curriculum in a departmentalized secondary school?
2. How do we build quality arts programs without adequate financial resources?

Additional topics requested by superintendents/assistant superintendents

1. A session for superintendents only
2. More public relations/advocacy ideas
3. Funding sources to help sustain arts education programs
4. Models of quality arts instruction and effective integration, especially at the secondary level
5. A stronger connection with the Los Angeles County Office of Education, an *Arts for All* partner that provides the districts additional guidance on arts education

Additional topics requested by arts coordinators

1. More information on budgeting and financial systems
2. Instruction in grant writing and fundraising
3. How to advocate that arts coordinators be included in curriculum and instruction meetings in their respective districts

Other suggestions

1. Expand the range of educational leaders by inviting other key stakeholders such as the school board president or designee or the County superintendent of schools to pertinent meetings; also invite key school principals and arts specialists to instructional quality sessions
2. More site visits
3. More opportunities to share successes and on-going challenges the leaders had in implementing components of their arts plan
4. Opportunities for sustained communication and collaboration among participants after the end of the program
5. Have *Arts for All* representatives attend school board meetings, present *Arts for All's* goals and benefits and identify ways that board members and other district and community stakeholders can provide meaningful support

ARTS FOR ALL'S LEARNING

Challenges

The biggest challenge experienced in implementing the Leadership Fellows Program was the limited participation of superintendents. Many missed sessions because of scheduling conflicts, or would arrive at a session only to leave due to emergencies — particularly related to the budget — calling them back to the office. Despite special efforts to accommodate their schedules, only one superintendent was able to attend the sessions on a consistent basis, which reaffirmed the Leadership Forum finding that the assistant superintendent is the key participant to target throughout the program.

Conclusions

The Leadership Fellows program revealed some of the limitations district leaders face in advancing arts education. Until recently, the quality and scope of arts education programs have been determined largely by decisions made at the school-site level. As a result, district leaders have not spent much time considering the policy and funding tools they can utilize to drive change across all schools. During the program, district leaders noted the tension between their own aspirations for more equity across their schools and the tradition of deferring to local school decision-making. At the elementary school level, it was noted that supplemental funds raised by parents and principal leadership were determining factors in which programs were able to move forward. In middle and high schools, schools have been allowed to make their own choices about the number and variety of arts elective courses. Because of great variance among the elementary school resources and difference in secondary course offerings, few districts have achieved a cohesive K-12 sequence in one arts discipline, let alone all four. Future programs for district leaders would be wise to spend more time considering the nuts and bolts of district-level decisions that can help advance arts education on a more consistent and equitable basis.

Despite this limitation, based on participants' favorable responses to the Leadership Fellows Program, the program was successful in engaging school district leadership to think critically about arts education. It also deepened their understanding of high quality arts education, allowing them to view the arts more on par with other subject areas. Whether or not their capacity to implement

arts education has increased is more difficult to measure, particularly as the economic crisis continues and school districts are forced to trim all curricular areas. As of this writing, all five school districts have managed to maintain the core of their arts education programming. Several have chosen to use their \$10,000 Leadership Fellows grants in novel ways, creating new arts education learning communities for generalist teachers to better understand the element of quality, or developing arts education sections of their schools' Single Site Plans. One considerably expanded its arts education program and its commitment of resources to that program.

The program supported the hypothesis that engaging school district leadership in this way is critical to district-wide arts education reform. Given that superintendent engagement and commitment is essential to any major initiative in a district, a different approach vis-à-vis superintendents is warranted.

Looking ahead

Drawing from the suggestions brought to light in the final program evaluation, *Arts for All* staff is redesigning the program. In doing so it is collaborating with the Los Angeles County Office of Education (LACOE), which provides numerous services to school districts, including professional development opportunities for administrators. LACOE is attuned to school districts' needs, particularly at a time of continued fiscal uncertainty.

While design of the new program is still underway, several key changes are being made. Rather than focusing exclusively on district-level groups, the program will target assistant superintendents and ask them to attend with a team of up to five key principals. The program will also be delivered regionally across the County. Both of these adjustments are made in the hope of cultivating self-sustaining learning communities within particular school districts and between clusters of school districts.

The program will also maintain its thematic focus on high-quality arts education, but shift toward highlighting concrete models of shared delivery that address the relationship between the principal, generalist teacher and community arts organization or teaching artist.

Arts for All looks forward to sharing the results and lessons learned from these redesigned programs in the future.





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