

SUMMARY REPORT:



From the Small Group Sessions of the: **2015 New Hampshire Arts Education Partnership Conference**
The Art & Spirit of Leadership



New Hampshire
Hosted by the **State Council on the Arts** - Led by Michele Holt-Shannon of NH Listens

Background

On November 6, 2015 over 100 New Hampshire teaching artists, arts educators, teachers, administrators and community arts leaders, gathered in Portsmouth at *3S Artspace* for the NH Fall Arts Education Partnership Conference focused on the art and spirit of leadership. At the invitation of the hosts, NH Listens was asked to design an opportunity for participants to talk together about critical priorities for their work.

The conversation was framed around a key question: *How can we make NH a great place for everyone to experience the transformative power of arts learning?* In addition, groups explored the assets and challenges of their work and discussed solutions for addressing the challenges and capitalizing on the assets. The goals of these conversations were to:

- Inform future work of arts educators, teaching artists, community arts leaders and statewide entities with concrete ideas;
- Amplify the voices of practitioners in the field and their multiple perspectives;
- Empower on-the-ground practitioners to create change in their own community/institution.

Priorities and Themes

The key challenges that were identified repeatedly included the need to address a perceived lack of value for the arts, the lack of equitable access to arts learning, limited resources, the need to hear directly from students, and the need for more opportunities to connect and collaborate. These themes are elaborated upon below, including ideas for individual and collective action. The discussion guide and each small group's notes may be found in the appendices.

Advocacy and Creativity: Change the Perception of the Value of the Arts

Every small group discussed the need for shared leadership and strategies to address greater understanding and value for the arts. This perception is experienced by arts educators and teaching artists in the allocation of time and resources, lack of understanding from colleagues and parents, as well as the reduction of arts time in the core curriculum to make room for testing. There is a desire for creative, unified messaging about the necessity of the arts. Participants would like to see tools and messages created that they can use themselves and that they would see reflected in other communities and across the state.

“Arts are essential. Not a special.”

When discussing what is most important to convey, participants mentioned the critical role of the arts in citizenship and democracy, creativity, flexible thinking and problem solving, plus nurturing individual talents and confidence. Many arts educators spoke about the environment in their classrooms that encourages appropriate risk taking (trying something and failing and trying again), positive self-expression, and belonging. This helps develop grit and

persistence as well as problem solving skills and an ability to read and understand implied messages in life. There is a need for greater understanding of the contributions the arts make to developing critical thinking.

Participants also discussed arts and economic development, the heritage of the arts in communities and the state, and the role arts can play in learning and work environments. Also mentioned was the critical role of the arts in supporting and retaining young people in a community. There is a desire to increase the value placed on arts education through messages that amplify arts as a core component of a quality education.

In addition to messages, participants mentioned a number of strategies for strengthening relationships in schools, with families, in communities, and across sectors. Many of these started with finding creative ways to experience the arts.

Participants talked about ways to increase outreach to parents and families. Parents seem attentive to the need for STEM (Science Technology Engineering Math) competencies in their children, but are less familiar with integrated arts for STEAM (STEM + Arts) outcomes. Some strategies mentioned included presenting families with an arts experience that is then explained in ways that articulate the arts skills transfer. Getting parents involved in art making can build critical support and understanding.

“Students love seeing adults do art”

Some community outreach ideas that were shared included use of blogs and social media, partnering with the local news, and strengthening connections to colleges and universities. Many participants mentioned the need to reach out across sectors and academic disciplines to build partnerships. Involving nontraditional stakeholders in arts experiences (seniors, businesses, college students, veterans) can help encourage lifelong learners and create breakthrough projects in the community.

Finally, participants feel the need to strengthen their own skills as advocates and spokespeople for the arts and public policy impacting arts learning. Some suggested the creation of an arts advocacy class within programs or as a workshop available for professional development to increase arts voices at the public policy table. While a number of participants are concerned about taking students’ focus away from making art in order to increase advocacy, most see educating others on the value of arts as a big responsibility and are seeking concrete support for these endeavors.

Access to the Arts for All Students

There is concern that access to arts learning is very uneven across New Hampshire. This unevenness plays out geographically in rural and underserved areas. Economically, lower income students have decreased access in a pay-to-play arts environment. Programmatically, students have limited access to varied types of arts learning.

Across New Hampshire, participants discussed the differing challenges in rural and underserved areas. In these locations, the need for grant support for artist residencies is even more critical. Participants discussed the role of parent teacher groups and how transformative visible community art projects can be to build trust and support.

Access for students focused on making arts affordable in and out of school. Participants observed that a lack of transportation impacts students’ consistent participation in activities that require after school and evening involvement. While the arts themselves are seen as a great “equalizer,” uneven access due to income and other family resources such as time and transportation, marginalize the impact of the arts and add to the frustration and isolation of arts educators.

“Arts are an equalizer”



Finally, participants shared extensively about the need for all artistic disciplines to be better represented across schools. Dance seems especially underrepresented. Still, students do not have access across the visual arts, performing arts, and media arts. Like other disciplines and learning experiences, the arts seem unnecessarily separated and participants shared strategies for encouraging more connected and integrated approaches. Some of these include: curriculum based enrichment projects; artist residency and creative youth development programs; connecting across generations with partners in preschools and senior centers; knitting for the homeless; programs with veterans; Old Home Days, and strong connections with local libraries.

Amplify Student Voices and Experiences

In addition to access to the arts for students, much of the conversation among arts educators was centered on student experiences. Despite challenges, students are a primary motivator for arts educators and teaching artists. They expressed pride in being able to create learning environments where students can support their peers, teach each other, and relate their learning beyond the walls of the school and into their community. Several participants mentioned that students often see the arts classroom as a sanctuary where they feel a sense of belonging.

“Students can feel relaxed in art class”

Some of the challenges discussed included the struggles of students to be creative themselves rather than just the consumers of creativity. Some students appear to be over scheduled with little downtime or quality time with adults and many struggled with the freedom of creativity and “fear not having the right answer.” Teachers are inspired when they are able to foster developmental shifts toward artistic expression but see the context of students needing different ways to express themselves as all the more important in a task-focused school environment. Connections between the arts, creative youth development and prevention are undervalued.

Some of the ideas shared included ways to encourage students to share their arts/music/stories with people in their lives, highlighting the breakthroughs of older students to inspire younger students, and harnessing the skills of “digital natives” to highlight the power of the arts. Starting with how arts are discussed in the classroom, arts educators can impact a student’s ability to talk with parents about art, share art with broader audiences, and amplify enthusiasm and talents.

Addressing Resource Limitations

The conversations included many ideas for addressing challenges, all of which acknowledged the context of a resource constrained environment for the arts. The primary challenges were limitations in time, funding, and the overall structure of funding education in New Hampshire that many perceive as problematic.

Many arts educators discussed their struggles with limited time. Adequate time to prepare and plan, time to connect with critical partners in and out of school, and time to nourish their own artistic endeavors - for themselves and as a way of enriching their teaching - were all discussed.

Core resources of funding, including grants and access to adequate supplies, were discussed. There were questions about the distribution of funding options in NH, access to grants, and the combined challenges of continually needing to find funding, build partnerships, and advocate for the arts in addition to creating and sustaining transformative arts experiences with students. This context adds to the workload of arts educators in ways that often feel overwhelming. There is a perception that there are fewer grants opportunities today and that rural areas seeking grants are at a disadvantage. Similarly, arts educators are concerned that there are fewer options for artist

residencies. Artist residencies are seen as a key way to add capacity and energy, and many see strengthening this capacity as important.

“Adequate funding is always an issue”

Finally, participants discussed how education is funded locally, statewide, and nationally in ways that are fundamentally at the heart of the dilemma of adequacy and value. Arts educators and teaching artists feel an urgency to make arts education an essential part of human experience, building on the enthusiasm from students in the arts to tie arts literacy to other subjects.

Collaboration and Connections

Some of the key challenges faced by arts educators include: feeling isolated in their work; arts being too disconnected from other subjects; finding the time and energy to build stronger networks locally, regionally, and statewide. Many participants talked about the contributions they can make through leadership and collaboration with other teachers, artists, parents and community members.

Participants discussed the need to start in their own schools and communities to increase interdisciplinary reciprocity, connect across subjects, and work intentionally to bring STEAM partners together. There is interest in a central resource of best practices for this work, including support for regional conferences and workshops for non-arts teachers, parents, community leaders and administrators. This may also help to involve arts teachers in grade level and core curriculum planning. Some mentioned building on programs like the NH Arts Learning Network.

A critical asset of the network of arts educators is their passion and ability as artists to work collaboratively in a small state. Many would like to see the network connecting more through a state wide roster. Others discussed the need to stay positive and share the credit across efforts. Finally, arts educators have rich assets to share bringing resourcefulness and creative problem solving for positive action.



To join one of NH Listens Facilitator Training Sessions, or learn more about NH Listens Policy, [visit their website](#).

, a program of the Carsey Institute for Public Policy



To read the Discussion Guide and each Small Group’s session notes [visit NH Arts Learning Network on the web](#), then hover over Resources and look for the Art & Spirit of Leadership: Fall 2015 Arts Education Conference.



New Hampshire

To learn about FY 2017 Arts Learning Grants and Programs at the State Council on the Arts [visit our website](#).



New Hampshire State Council on the Arts

www.nh.gov/nharts * www.nhartslearningnetwork.org

