

COMMENTARY

What Constitutes an Arts-Rich School?

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PUBLISHED: January 7, 2014

Access to education in [visual art, music, theatre, and dance](#) is varied and unequal across public schools in the United States. Yet the extent of this inequality is largely undocumented. In a [recent report](#) from the [President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities](#), the committee concluded that policymakers lack a basic understanding of access to arts education because there is no required data collection of the courses schools offer. We know that the students with the least opportunity to study the arts are low-income students or students of color, but how access varies from state to state remains unclear.

Using student-level data from Texas in [this study](#), we set out to describe the variation in arts course offerings and rates of student participation for 870 public high schools by developing several indices that measure different dimensions of access to education in the arts. We were surprised to find that high schools offering a large number of arts courses did not necessarily cultivate high rates of student engagement, and those fostering high levels of student participation did not necessarily have the resources to offer a wide variety of courses. We determined, at a minimum, policymakers should examine course offerings jointly with student participation rates to accurately identify exceptional programs in the arts. Counting courses will simply designate large, non-rural high schools as arts-rich even if a significant portion of the student body does not participate.

Our recommendations for policymakers and educators are twofold. First, we recommend that other states use their education databases to create an index that combines course offerings and student participation rates into a single measure of access. Our methods can provide a roadmap states can use to describe their own arts education landscapes. Such statewide evaluations are necessary to address issues of equity and ensure that public high schools are offering sufficient arts opportunities to their students. Providing arts instruction to all California public school students is codified into law, yet budget cuts continue to alter available opportunities. For example, The [Los Angeles Unified School District](#) (LAUSD) cut the arts education budget by 76 percent from 2007–2012. While such drastic cuts are clearly tied to the fiscal stress that many states and localities faced in the wake of the Great Recession, many arts advocates believe that arts education in California has been languishing since the passage of Proposition 13 over 30 years ago. The [California Longitudinal Pupil Achievement Data System](#) (CALPADS) contains course enrollment and completion data for all public school students in the state. We urge policymakers to use that data to document access to arts education in California.

Second, we urge educators, practitioners, parents, and policymakers to begin a dialogue about what defines an arts-rich school based on the data elements commonly found in state education databases. When we began this research two years ago, it quickly became apparent that there was no [standard definition](#) of what it means to be an arts-rich school. For example, what should the number and range of arts courses be to define a school as arts-rich, given school size and funding availability? What percentage of the student body should participate in any year? Because we did not have answers to these questions, we chose to arbitrarily designate high schools as arts-rich if they fell in the top 25 percent of the distribution on our indices. The field needs to determine

acceptable thresholds for both course offerings in the arts and rates of student participation so researchers will not have to rely on arbitrary metrics to identify the schools with adequate arts programs and those without. While course offerings and student participation rates paint an incomplete picture of available arts opportunities, their description is a critical first step in understanding access to arts education.

The [*full study*](#) (ungated) can be found in Thomas, M. K., Singh, P., Klopfenstein, K., Henry, T. (2013). *Access to High School Arts Education: Why Student Participation Matters as Much as Course Availability*. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 21 (83)

Suggested citation

Thomas, M. K. (2014, January). *What constitutes an arts-rich school?* [Commentary]. Policy Analysis for California Education.

<https://edpolicyinca.org/newsroom/what-constitutes-arts-rich-school>



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