ACHIEVING POSITIVE OUTCOMES FOR YOUTH: CREATIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT AND CROSS-SECTOR COLLABORATION
BY CYNTHIA CAMPOY BROPHY

This February, nearly 40 experienced creative youth development (CYD) practitioners from Southern California gathered at the Armory Center for the Arts in Pasadena, CA to hear from a panel of cross-sector leaders. The event, hosted by the Creative Youth Development National Partnership, explored opportunities for collaboration between the creative youth development field and adjacent sectors (e.g., youth development, workforce development, mental health) to achieve positive outcomes for youth. Creative youth development organizations across the country—organizations that are using the arts to encourage positive risk-taking, promote leadership development, and build career pathways—have a vision that overlaps with various youth-oriented sectors. Our key question was: How can CYD and adjacent sectors actively identify shared priorities and break down barriers to effective partnership?

As executive director of artworxLA and a member of the National Guild’s CYD Member Network Steering Committee, I was asked to moderate the panel. Panelists included: Robert Sainz, Assistant General Manager of the City of Los Angeles Economic and Workforce Development Department; Alex Johnson, Managing Director of Californians for Safety and Justice, LA County Board of Education, and Board Member of Arts for Incarcerated Youth Network; and Danielle Brazell, General Manager of the City of LA Department of Cultural Affairs. Denise Montgomery, Director, CYD National Initiative, provided opening remarks. In this article, I will explore the vital themes that came out of our discussion and detail their implications for community arts educators looking to collaborate with other sectors to better serve youth. (continued on page 9)
The Opportunity

There are five key policy imperatives that are driving the creative youth development national movement (see National Policy Agenda: http://creativyouthdevelopment.org/growing-the-field). CYD aims to serve as a catalyst for cross-sector collaboration, to support and propel youth leadership, to align arts education efforts with the social justice sector, to boldly document and communicate impact in a language that crosses sectors, and to expand funding sources.

Catalyzed by the 2014 CYD National Summit, and building on decades of knowledge and practice at the community level, the CYD movement has organized over the last several years in response to the evolution of the arts education field. As practitioners gained experience bringing powerful arts programs to schools and communities, the realization emerged that we teach young people more than how to paint, how to create music, how to perform. We empower students to gain life skills that provide greater options for their future. The CYD movement acknowledges that many practitioners in the field intentionally work beyond an arts silo. Additionally, they teach marketable skills that make young people competitive in a 21st century skills workplace, that build stronger communities, and that create connections across neighborhoods and across social sectors.

As we confirm that CYD shares the same goals as those in mental health, labor, workforce readiness, we realize there is an opportunity to work across sectors, to identify and overcome perceived boundaries, and to formalize a collaborative network.

Priorities

The panelists began their conversation by sharing the top-level priorities of their respective fields, which include workforce readiness, social service, and the arts. Ultimately, it became clear that key priorities for those working in the workforce development and social service sector overlap considerably with the focus of many arts education practitioners. In particular, panelists shared that key sector priorities are related to:

- **Student retention** and keeping young people on track to graduate
- **Wrap-around services** that **support the whole child**, including programs for healthy eating, trauma assistance, and development of self-confidence
- The need to work across sectors to create **multi-pronged pathways of support**
- Building integrated services that can **break the school to prison pipeline** and reverse the negative impacts of systemic trauma

The arts education field has been addressing these issues for many years. Hearing from representatives in other sectors that their fields share similar high-level priorities was affirming and reinforced the need to move forward with successful collaboration.

Incentives

The panel confirmed that no one sector alone can address the overwhelming obstacles that our students often face. We are stronger and more effective when we work together, but working together can be challenging. We asked our panelists to identify incentives that motivate larger government agencies, school districts, and corporations to work with smaller arts education partners. Here is what they said:

**Engagement**

Keeping a vulnerable youth population engaged in school and in after-school programs that serve them is necessary for their success, yet is a key challenge. Obstacles including transportation, family obligations, the need to get a job, and actual interest in participation, are all real reasons for lack of youth participation. Robert Sainz shared that the dropout issue is a key concern to the workforce investment field, and that there is a recognized need to engage students in school and community programs so that they get the support they need to launch into a successful adulthood. He recognized that certain young people have talents that only the arts can unleash, that the arts is a known "engager," and that programs that include the arts have higher levels of student retention. Engaged students come to school more often, participate in afterschool programs, which increases retention and student success. The arts education community produces creative programming that is unique, that effectively connects to a vulnerable youth population, and that adds value to the collective effort to engage and support our students.

Different ways of thinking

Often students at highest risk of dropping out of school are different thinkers. The panelists recognized that these students benefit from the opportunity to work with professional artists who serve as mentors and who provide alternative points-of-view that broaden students’ perspectives. Students benefit from having a different voice in their education, and the arts provide a different set of meaning to their lives. Students who might not be book smart and who don’t engage in their education via traditional means, get connected to school and community through the arts. One panelist stated that the arts meet young people where they are, and emphasized that this is a reason for complementary fields to collaborate.

**Cross-sector skills**

The panel acknowledged that our current economy demands sector-specific skills as well as “soft skills” including teamwork and collaboration, adaptability, problem solving, critical observation, conflict resolution, a strong work ethic, and effective communication. In order to be competitive, young people need this relevant training. Panelists recognized that these skills are taught in a unique way through the arts, and in a way that cannot be taught by other sectors. Theater teaches self-confidence and teamwork; painting teaches young people how to observe and to be more mindful to look beyond the obvious; poetry teaches how to write in a way that a traditional English class does not. The opportunity to learn differently is a unique offering of our community and one that adds value to the pathway conversation.

**Incentive of developing pathways**

The problems that the CYD movement is working to tackle are the intractable problems that our vulnerable youth face. Problems such as poverty, lack of access to higher education and to quality jobs, and breaking the school to prison pipeline are all issues that have been plagues communities for decades. The panel acknowledged that there is an incentive to bring different voices to these leadership conversations. They acknowledged that having an "arts voice" at decision-making tables provides alternative thinking that helps the group address issues differently, and helps move the field forward.

For example, Alex Johnson sits on the board of the Arts for Incarcerated Youth Network, a partnership model that supports an interdisciplinary collaborative of arts providers that each provide programming to juveniles detained in the County’s probation camps and halls. Each organization alone is challenged by their capacity to partner with Probation, but as a network, the good work is amplified and supported. The impact of the arts in the juvenile system has moved from a series of individual arts classes to a comprehensive reintegration strategy for young
people. The Network is a model for community-public partnership that includes many of the practitioners who were present in the audience including The Armory, Unusual Suspects, Write Girl, and artworxLA. Johnson reminded us that “broken children become broken adults. We need to find unique ways to heal children.” The AIYN collaborative approach is putting the arts at the center of this thinking in a way that is comprehensive and long-term.

**Challenges**

While the panel affirmed shared priorities and identified incentives for collaboration, they acknowledged the inherent challenges of working across sectors. The most significant challenges fell into the following categories:

- **Financial**—Robert Sainz shared a financial challenge he faces when working together to prepare and place students in internships, identifying a need to create a more formalized connection between service providers and the workplace. He emphasized the value of internship opportunities in the creative field but noted that they are often unpaid and lack the kinds of wrap around services (financial literacy, case management, etc.) that would make them more impactful. He noted, however, that advocating for funds from workforce investment boards to support internship opportunities is worth the effort. Sainz shared the example of the work that Shakespeare LA has done over many decades as a great example. Through their Will Power for Youth program, they access government funds to hire teenagers to rehearse and perform a Shakespeare play during the summer. Students learn marketable “soft skills” while delving deep into a particular piece of the Bard.

- **Messaging**—The panelists recognized that strong partnerships need an effective message for why that partnership is necessary. How do we get other sectors to see the arts as a powerful tool to meet the shared priorities? How do we learn the language of complementary sectors so that we can speak more powerfully together, resulting in more effective results? Humanizing our students’ stories is a powerful way to communicate the positive effects of arts programming. The panel recognized the role that the arts play in sharing the real obstacles that our students face in their daily lives in a way that can motivate practitioners to reach across our silos to work together.

- **Leadership**—The panel discussed the importance of engaging leadership from all stakeholders in the pathway ecosystem to invest in cross-sector work over time. Invested leaders incentivize their staff to think about their work collaboratively, to move people out of their silos, to reduce the “me first” attitude, or the attitude that “my issue is bigger than the other issues.” Leaders need to be willing to take a risk and to have long-view vision to achieve system change, not short-term/direct impact. It is important to engage leaders across the hierarchy so that partnerships continue beyond any one leader’s incentive to invest in any one effort.

**Examples from the Field: artworxLA**

Working within the context of the CYD framework, artworxLA has launched two related projects this year that capitalize on the shared priorities and incentives identified by the panel, while also acknowledging the challenges.

We received a grant from the US Department of Labor through the Latino Coalition for Community Leadership. The grant specifically targets 18-24 year olds who have not yet obtained their high school diploma, who have been involved in the criminal justice system, and who live in high-crime/high-poverty neighborhoods. We are partnering with the Los Angeles Education Corps, a local charter high school that serves this demographic, and we are providing an arts curriculum to engage students in their education to keep them on track to graduate. The curriculum is focused on music and design, and teaches marketable skills valued in these specific creative industry sectors. In addition to engaging students in their school work to keep them on track to obtain their high school diploma, we will place students in jobs. 1 in 6 jobs in LA County are in the creative industries; we are working to create a pathway to identify entry level jobs in these industries and to give our students the tools they need to enter and grow within these sectors.

A second project we have embarked on is an 18-month planning process funded by a significant grant from The James Irvine Foundation to develop a replicable Creative Careers Pathway Model to support teenagers at highest risk of dropping out of high school. Inspired by the success of our pilot Arts Academy, launched in partnership with the Los Angeles County Office of Education, and motivated by 25 years of experience working with this population, we will spend the next year and a half reflecting, exploring, and visioning. We want to dive into lessons learned over our 25-year history, articulate the ecosystem within which we work, and create a replicable pathway prototype centered on arts engagement in alternative education leading to career readiness and living-wage work. The work will result in a strategic plan for a pathway model that includes three new arts academy sites focused on three growth sectors of LA’s creative economy: Fashion, Music/Entertainment, and Design/Publishing.

**Conclusion**

Many of the targeted youth populations that arts education organizations serve face deeply entrenched problems that can derail any one arts education practitioner working alone. It is time to move beyond our own work, join forces with other youth serving organizations/agencies, and become more powerful together. The creative youth development national movement is a community of impassioned activists and seasoned practitioners who know the struggles our students face, and who now have decades of experience understanding what works and what doesn’t. The need to network and collaborate is essential. And, as Alex Johnson stated during the panel, we need to “agitate” and creatively disrupt old thinking so that we can more effectively and inspirationally increase the opportunities for our nation’s young people.

**About the Author**

Cynthia Campoy Brophy is executive director of artworxLA, an organization that combats the epidemic high school dropout crisis by engaging students in a long-term, sequential arts program. She also serves on the National Guild’s CYD Network Steering Committee.