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Creative Youth Development: Transforming the Learning Environment

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Creative Youth Development is a long-standing practice that fuels students' potential by intentionally integrating creative skill-building, inquiry and expression with positive youth development principles.¹ In CYD programs, young people create original work through arts experiences and apply their creative skills to solve problems. These programs may be particularly beneficial for underserved youth, providing them with opportunities to amplify inherent strengths and talents, build positive relationships, and express themselves in safe and healthy spaces.

CYD programs utilize partnerships between community-based organizations, educators and local artists to fill institutional gaps in opportunities for at-risk youth.

Increased flexibilities under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) offer states the opportunity to explore the use of innovative strategies to provide students with a [well-rounded education](#) that includes the arts. CYD strategies may serve to narrow the achievement gap and increase equity in education systems.² Additionally, states may use CYD programs in conjunction with other educational initiatives, including those related to school improvement, alternative education, deeper learning, social-emotional learning and [21st century skills](#).

This brief provides an overview of CYD and its connections to student success, examples of successful programs and considerations for state policymakers.

CYD PROGRAMS ARE:

- Asset-based arts education and youth engagement programs that provide hands-on experiences in the arts in safe and healthy spaces.
- Often designed with the needs of young people from underserved communities in mind.
- Meant to develop students' identities, skills and connections with community.
- Holistic, youth-driven programs that set high expectations for growth and learning.
- Usually held in after-school or out-of-school-time hours, but could also be utilized as an in-school strategy.

Background

CYD bridges youth development with arts education by combining the arts with programming to foster life skills, such as leadership, teamwork and communication. Research shows that when young people have opportunities to express themselves and connect with their communities, those experiences positively impact their self-confidence and engagement.³ Additionally, out-of-school-time programs have emerged as a key strategy for increasing youth engagement and contributing to substantial learning gains.⁴ CYD programs — which typically take place in out-of-school-time settings — complement learning that takes place during the school day by providing students with opportunities to apply their creative skills to solve real-world problems.⁵

CYD programs focus on strategies to engage learners historically overlooked by traditional education models. Often, schools fall short of meeting the needs of at-risk youth.⁶ CYD programs play a crucial role in filling some of these institutional gaps and meeting the needs of underserved students by providing them with valuable opportunities to express themselves and explore their personal development.⁷ In doing so, these programs emphasize youth voice and leadership, high expectations, experiential and project-based learning, positive relationships with peers and adult mentors, and safe and healthy learning spaces.

Education leaders looking for innovative solutions to ensure all students have access to a well-rounded education may consider adopting or expanding CYD programs in their schools. Under ESSA, states have flexibility to support arts programs, like CYD, through Title II grants; Title IV programs, such as student support and academic enrichment grants; and 21st century community learning center programs.

Research

Research shows that participation in the arts has a positive effect on a wide range of outcomes for youth. Engagement with the arts not only reinforces [deeper-learning skills](#), but studies show that it also positively impacts academic outcomes, such as standardized test performance.⁸ In addition, arts engagement has been linked with improved social behaviors, reduced likelihood of school suspension and increased school engagement.⁹ These outcomes may be particularly significant for low-income and at-risk students.¹⁰

Program Impact

After-school programs that utilize partnerships between community-based organizations, educators and local artists play an important role in filling institutional gaps for at-risk youth.¹¹ These programs accomplish this by emphasizing the role of creative inquiry and artistic solutions in youths' lives.¹² Research suggests that after-school CYD programs help participants develop critical competencies in three areas:

- 1 | Artistic, academic and expressive skills.
- 2 | Identity and positive self-image.
- 3 | Meaningful societal relationships and community involvement.

CYD programs do more than simply expose youth to arts; they aim to cultivate participants' artistic and academic competencies through repeated practice and engagement in art-making. The [Boston Youth Arts Evaluation Project](#) (BYAEP) model for evaluating arts programming includes measures for presenting students with challenging experiences aimed at building their artistic skills, identity development and community involvement. Similarly, a three-year University of Michigan study of the [Mosaic Model](#) of positive youth development found that when participants understand the high expectations set for them, they develop a mastery of artistic and academic skills.¹³

In addition to fostering engagement with the arts, CYD programs encourage the development of a positive self-image. In its evaluation framework, the BYAEP model includes measures for providing young people with opportunities to develop confidence in themselves, inform their cultural identities and help them form a positive view of their futures. The study of the Mosaic Model found that participants learned to set high expectations for themselves and envisioned ambitious professional and academic goals.

These individual life skills have implications for the overall health of local communities, as youth participants report high levels of community involvement. In a [comprehensive review](#) of programs, the [Surdna Foundation](#) found that regular participation led students to build strong social networks by engaging in powerful mentoring relationships with a diverse group of peers and artists. Similarly, the BYAEP model seeks to measure how participants develop meaningful relationships and civic engagement sensibilities as they contribute to, and are recognized by, an inclusive environment.

Program Design

Research on arts education and CYD emphasizes that positive youth outcomes are the result of high-quality and rigorous programs, and it identifies several elements of effective programs that contribute to participants' growth and development.¹⁴ A central theme is the assumption that participants are viewed as resources, not as children in need of behavioral correction; participants bring their own knowledge and expertise to the programs and positively contribute to the content and curriculum. Foundational research on CYD programs reveals five common elements of effective programs:

- 1 | Engage students through arts education** by focusing on hands-on skill-building and demonstrating a commitment to the artistic advancement and personal growth of participants.
- 2 | Create a safe and affirming environment** by ensuring that program spaces are welcoming, inspiring, and physically and emotionally safe for participants.
- 3 | Employ quality educators** who are professional, practicing artists committed to youth development and regular collaboration with participants.
- 4 | Foster relationship-building and social skill development** by encouraging small-group interaction, connecting students with professional and peer artists outside the program, and maintaining engagement with alumni.
- 5 | Promote student ownership** by setting high expectations for participants and allowing them to assume leadership roles and use their own experiences to shape programs.¹⁵

State and Program Examples

Many states put research into practice through a variety of CYD programs for at-risk or underserved youth. Several states — **California, Georgia** and **Massachusetts** — successfully integrated support for CYD programs into cultural agencies and councils either by funding community organizations or participating in public-private collaborations. Other states, such as **Rhode Island**, have demonstrated success at local levels, where school districts partnered with community-based organizations to facilitate after-school CYD programs.



CALIFORNIA: Arts for Incarcerated Youth Network

[Arts for Incarcerated Youth Network's mission](#) is to utilize arts education as a sentencing alternative, an intervention for traumatized incarcerated youth and a re-entry strategy for juvenile offenders. [Through a partnership](#) with Los Angeles County Probation and the Los Angeles County Arts Commission, AIYN provides arts programming to 17 juvenile detention sites and over 500 incarcerated youths. The cross-agency collaboration uses arts education to connect academic learning with out-of-school experiences and to expose participants to career opportunities in the arts.

At the same time the LA County Board of Supervisors voted to curtail the use of solitary confinement for juvenile detainees, AIYN was preparing to introduce year-round arts programming. The resulting collaboration recruited young offenders to paint murals in former solitary confinement rooms, transforming them into [“cooling down” areas or “hope centers.”](#)



GEORGIA: Georgia Afterschool and Youth Development

Endorsed by the state department of education, division of family and children services, department of health and the governor's office for children and families, [Georgia Afterschool and Youth Development](#) offers two primary resources for after-school programs: research-based quality standards to inform program development and assessment, and an annual [professional learning and networking conference](#). The [quality standards](#) offer a framework for the design and continuous improvement of after-school programs. The standards identify opportunities for youths to advance their skills in STEAM (science, technology, engineering, arts and mathematics) and music as a hallmark indicator of high-quality, after-school programming.

In addition to the collaboration between state agencies and the governor's office on after-school and youth development quality standards, the process was also informed and supported by an [array of experts](#) in the fields of education, youth development, public health and juvenile justice. Recognizing that high-quality programs can make important contributions to young people's development and well-being, standards help to ensure that Georgia's CYD programs benefit youth socially, emotionally and academically.



MASSACHUSETTS: YouthReach Initiative

The [Mass Cultural Council](#) — a state agency charged with promoting the arts, humanities and sciences to create a rich cultural life for Massachusetts residents — [identified](#) CYD programs as an important part of the state’s arts education ecosystem, with important links to youth development.¹⁶ With support from the National Endowment for the Arts and funds from the Arts Lottery Fund, the council’s [YouthReach initiative](#) promotes out-of-school programs that integrate arts, humanities and science opportunities in response to the needs of the community. Over the past 23 years, YouthReach has granted more than \$13 million to 120 organizations to support CYD programs. [Primary grant applicants](#) must be nonprofit, cultural organizations with a strong history of arts, humanities or science programming. Applicants must also demonstrate community involvement through collaboration with human services agencies, schools or other local, youth-serving organizations.

Since 2001, YouthReach has supported [Shakespeare in the Courts](#), a sentencing alternative for juvenile offenders. The Berkshire Juvenile Court works closely with probation officers and Shakespeare & Company artists to engage youth in arts performances in lieu of traditional penal sentences.



RHODE ISLAND: Providence After School Alliance

The [Providence After School Alliance](#) (PASA) — an intermediary organization, created through a [public-private partnership](#) with Providence Public Schools — provides logistical support to program partners so they can deliver high-quality, after-school programs. Logistical support includes recruiting program participants, coordinating transportation and providing hot meals to youths. This model allows PASA to run [two initiatives](#): the AfterZone for middle school students and the Hub for high school students. PASA operates AfterZone programs in five Providence middle schools — providing 1,500 students with access to STEM, arts and sports programs taught by local, community-based educators. Each year, the Hub serves 200 high school students at the Juanita Sanchez Educational Complex by offering [credit-bearing career and arts courses](#). Students have access to these out-of-school-time courses through the [Advanced Coursework Network](#) — a [statewide initiative](#) launched by Gov. Gina Raimondo and operated by the state department of education.

In 2013, directors from PASA, the Providence Public Schools and the Rhode Island Urban Debate League participated in a webinar to share their perspectives on the development and implementation of the Hub. Watch the [archived presentation](#) to learn about their experiences with collaborative program design, framework for student learning and program improvement, and student outcomes.

Policy Considerations

While various forms of CYD programs have existed for decades throughout the country, in 2014, a national community of practice coalesced when more than 200 arts and education leaders convened for the National Summit on Creative Youth Development. This summit united the field and presented an opportunity to evaluate, expand and elevate CYD programs across the country. Since then, the CYD National Partnership has worked to develop the [Creative Youth Development National Blueprint](#) in an effort to drive collective action, increase access to CYD and positively impact the lives of young people.

As education leaders continue to search for ways to narrow the achievement gap by accelerating the academic and social development of underserved youth, this growing field presents many pathways for supporting student success. Policymakers may want to explore the following areas of action to continue to support CYD expansion:

- **Arts opportunities in state ESSA plans:** As ESSA's definition of a well-rounded education includes the arts and music, consider opportunities to use student support and academic enrichment grants, in addition to 21st century community learning center program funding, to support the development or expansion of CYD programs.
- **Governance:** Ensure that arts, cultural and science agencies at the state level actively participate in collective efforts to improve youth outcomes. Encourage and support partnerships between CYD programs and youth-serving government agencies. Support, strengthen and encourage data-sharing between and among CYD and other youth-serving programs and institutions.
- **Youth-targeted programs:** Include priorities for CYD programs in public funding streams that target youth outcomes, including the Workforce Investment Act and high school redesign and career pathways initiatives. Include CYD programs in broader youth-focused initiatives and funding at the state level. Increase investments in CYD organizations to offer after-school and extended learning programs, including summer learning, summer jobs programs and alternative education opportunities. For juvenile offenders specifically, ensure that local courts have the discretion to refer juveniles to CYD programs in lieu of traditional sentences.
- **Community development:** Encourage local councils (arts, community development/cultural) and agencies representing adjacent policy sectors (county courts/health/youth development) to coordinate with arts nonprofits to increase the vitality of the local arts education ecosystem. Consider engaging with intermediary organizations that work with out-of-school-time systems and school districts to support more equitable resource pathways for local or small CYD groups seeking to improve student outcomes that foster social justice and civic engagement.

ENDNOTES

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- 12 Shirley Brice Heath and Adelma Roach, “Imaginative Actuality: Learning in the Arts During the Nonschool Hours,” in *Champions of Change: The Impact of the Arts on Learning*, ed. Edward Fiske (Washington, DC: Arts Education Partnership and President’s Committee on the Arts and Humanities, 1999), 19-34, <http://www.artsedsearch.org/study/imaginative-actuality-learning-in-the-arts-during-nonschool-hours/>; and Denise Montgomery, “The Rise of Creative Youth Development,” *Arts Education Policy Review* 118, no. 1 (June 2016): 1-18, <https://nationalguild.org/files/resources/public/rise-of-creative-youth-development.pdf>.

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