How ArtsNOW Builds Sustainable Capacity for Arts-Integrated Learning

Mary Dell'Erba and Matt Weyer

Since their founding in 2006, ArtsNOW has centered the core values of education, quality, creativity, innovation and collaboration to transform lives through customized, arts-integrated solutions to meet education needs. Recognizing barriers to student engagement and teacher effectiveness — such as stress, anxiety, negative effects of social media on mental health and narrow curricula — ArtsNOW aims to create an engaging learning environment to build key skills. These skills include creative problem solving, critical thinking, and social and emotional skills in addition to supporting achievement in all content areas.

Who's Involved

ArtsNOW aims to empower administrators, educators and ultimately students and families through an ongoing process in schools and at home. Key groups they engage are:

- Advisory councils and boards of directors.
- Consultants and teaching artists.
- Educators.
- School administrators.
- Students and families.
- University partners.

How It's Funded

ArtsNOW receives funding through federal grants, foundations, individual donations, and local and state programming.

How It Works

ArtsNOW provides customized and immersive professional learning and support for teachers, teaching artists and consultants to integrate dance, media arts, music, theatre and visual arts into academic lessons. To do this, they take a three-step approach:

1| Collaborative assessment. All partnerships begin with an initial needs assessment that represents a collaboration between ArtsNOW leadership and school administration.

2| Customized planning. Planning sessions are geared toward developing a proposal to address immediate needs as well as a multi-year plan to align ArtsNOW with the school-wide mission.

3| Service and support. ArtsNOW then provide ongoing service and support through consultations, onsite visits and virtual support.

STEM and the Art of Integrated Learning (SAIL)

SAIL is a federally funded Assistance for Arts Education grant from the U.S. Department of Education. It focuses on developing and testing arts-integrated lessons that are aligned with third through fifth grade content standards for math and science. It's supported by standards in the arts and incorporates inquiry-based activities to support the development of students' critical thinking skills. SAIL is also exploring how arts-based programming supports students' social and emotional skills. This is a five-year, multi-district effort in partnership with **Georgia** Tech's Center for Education Integrating Science, Math and Computing and Young Audiences Arts for Learning.

Interviews With Program Leaders

Through an interview with President and Chief Executive Officer Pamela Walker and Executive Vice President and Chief Operating Officer Crystal Collins, four themes and ideas emerged. These include:

- Aligning and embedding STEAM within communities.
- Creating space for continuous reflection and improvement.
- Building capacity and adapting mindsets.
- Sustaining and growing STEAM opportunities.

Aligning and Embedding STEAM Within Communities

A primary step of ArtsNOW's approach is to conduct a needs assessment and discuss desired end goals with their partners to center alignment and customization early on. This effort is enhanced through collaboration with district and school leaders and often includes a letter of commitment from principals. From there, ArtsNOW support is designed to align with and adapt to various student identities and populations based on collaboration between educators and the ArtsNOW team. They also regularly host parent-educator nights to create awareness, buy-in and engagement.

To embed programming within communities — in the SAIL grant specifically — school districts have offered facility space that can be used for planning and implementation. ArtsNOW works closely with the Center for Education Integrating Science Math and Computing at Georgia Tech to further embed STEAM education in local school communities.

Creating Space for Continuous Reflection and Improvement

ArtsNOW leverages a strong evaluation plan and data sharing agreements with districts and state education agencies to use existing achievement data from matched comparison schools to demonstrate program effects. To supplement achievement data, ArtsNOW evaluators work with teachers in focus groups to gather qualitative feedback as well as conduct satisfaction surveys and confidence ratings to paint a more comprehensive picture. This work helps to better understand and address teacher confidence in arts integration, which research indicates may need attention.

Building Capacity and Adapting Mindsets

To build capacity, ArtsNOW takes a multi-pronged approach, which includes:

- Identifying teacher leaders within their program buildings to act as peer leaders and provide trainings for new teachers.
- Providing support for teachers to overcome perceptions that they are not "arts people".
- Convening a network of principals across districts to share practices, lessons learned and host an annual conference.
- Building leadership and providing scaffolded content that can be delivered in classrooms with decreasing support over time.

Sustaining and Growing STEAM Opportunities

To provide sustainable programs in schools, ArtsNOW identifies multi-year goals focused on whole school approaches and reform that building relationships at all levels — with paraprofessionals, teachers, principals and district administrators, and leverage Title I funds to support these partnerships long-term. The **South Carolina** Arts Commission and Arts Grow SC have used Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief funds for ArtsNOW to provide training for districts with the least resources across the state to demonstrate the impact of these funds and eventually replace them with state innovation funding.

Considerations for State and Local Leaders

State and local leaders could consider encouraging evaluation requirements that are intended to be used for improvement and reflection, and funding evaluation as a project component. Additionally, state and local leaders could convene various groups in discussions around STEAM program design and implementation: school districts, businesses, community centers, libraries, institutions of higher education and others.

Additional Resources

The 2022-23 Annual Report provides information on the number of students served, educators supported and key outcomes. You can also find additional information on funding sources, partnerships and in-person convenings such as Foundational Seminars for educators and the first annual Principals' Network Conference.

See additional case studies in the series:
Key Lessons from Effective K-12 STEAM Education Organizations.

About the Authors

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