

# No Obituary Needed for Arts Education, Study Reveals

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<http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2012/04/11/28arts.h31.html?tkn=NTVFFLFi9kA9Rcd0HLVrjQaYuwEczK37dnhd&cmp=ENL-EU-NEWS1> By Erik W. Robelen

Rumors of the death of arts education in public schools have been greatly exaggerated, new data suggest.

Over the past decade, the availability of music and visual-arts instruction—on average—has changed little, and remains high, when compared with a decade ago, according to a major federal **report** on arts education issued this month.

But that's not the whole story. The data offer a complicated—and sometimes conflicting—narrative of the changes in arts access in public schools, with some ups, some downs, and some maintenance of the status quo.

Elementary instruction designated specifically for dance and theater, for instance, is fast becoming an endangered species, the data show, while the incorporation of those disciplines into other subjects is alive and well.

Meanwhile, disparities persist in access to arts education for impoverished students, but there is no consistent trend line.

## Getting Access

While music and visual-arts instruction were more widely available in high-poverty elementary schools in 2009-10, compared with a decade earlier, the opposite was true at the secondary level, the report finds.

It dropped from 100 percent to 81 percent in music, when comparing high-poverty secondary schools in 1999-2000 with 2008-09, and from 93 percent to 80 percent in the visual arts.

"When I look at the big picture, ... I see a good-news, bad-news story," U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan said in prepared remarks for the report's release, noting that it was the first federal survey that "really allows us" to examine changes in arts education over time.

"The good news is that the last decade has not generally produced a dramatic narrowing of the curriculum in the arts," he said. "But there is considerable bad news in today's report, too—and especially for disadvantaged students."

In fact, the National Center on Education Statistics data came out just days before the National Endowment for the Arts issued a [report](#) linking extensive arts access among at-risk youths to positive academic and civic outcomes.

### **'No Consistent Trend'**

It's often said by arts education advocates that the arts have been getting squeezed out of the curriculum in recent years, amid the dual pressures of the federal No Child Left Behind Act's emphasis on reading and math achievement and recession-driven declines in education spending.

But the new, nationally representative results tell a more complex story.

The report from the NCES, a division of the Department of Education, was drawn from a nationally representative survey of public schools administered in fall 2009, though the results for secondary schools refer to arts offerings during the prior school year.

"Generally, what we really found is there is no consistent trend of decline in arts education in public schools," said Jared Coopersmith, a project officer at the NCES. "However, we did find various instances of change."

The overall availability of all the arts disciplines in 2009-10 is highest for music instruction, above 90 percent, the data show, and virtually unchanged from a decade ago. Visual arts, meanwhile, saw a slight decline at both levels, but was still widely available.

Especially notable was the reported drop in elementary dance instruction, from 20 percent of schools in 1999-2000 to 3 percent in 2009-10. Drama/theater also showed a precipitous drop, from 20 percent to 4 percent.

Jane Bonbright, the executive director of the National Dance Education Organization, based in Silver Spring, Md., questioned the reliability and value of that dance figure. She said dance in elementary school is not typically taught as a discrete discipline, and so the more telling figure is the extent to which integration of dance with other disciplines was reported.

And here, the data show a majority of elementary schools, 61 percent, saying dance was incorporated, though that figure did fall from 66 percent a decade earlier.

Meanwhile, the proportion of secondary schools teaching dance and drama has dipped only slightly when comparing 1999-2000 with 2008-09. In dance, the figure declined from 14 percent to 12 percent, and in drama/theater, from 48 percent to 45 percent.

The **President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities** issued a statement on the NCES report expressing some relief about the big picture of arts access in schools. The advisory panel to the White House released a 2011 **report** that called for "reinvesting" in arts education.

"It is gratifying that, even in times of narrowing curriculum and economic hardships over the last decade, schools still see a strong value in access to arts education and continue to prioritize making it available to their students," the committee said.

At the same time, the panel highlighted "disturbing" data on the "persistence of the gap" in arts instruction between high- and low-poverty schools.

The gap is especially pronounced at the secondary level, where there were notable declines in access for schools serving mostly impoverished children.

For instance, 80 percent of high-poverty schools reported visual-arts instruction for 2008-09, compared with 95 percent of low-poverty schools. In addition, 81 percent of high-poverty schools reported music instruction, compared with 96 percent of low-poverty schools. (The report defines high-poverty schools as having three-fourths or more students eligible for a free or reduced-price lunch. Low-poverty schools have no more than a quarter of such students.)

By contrast, there was virtually no gap in the general availability of music instruction at the elementary level between low-poverty and high-poverty schools, the data show.

But basic access doesn't give the full picture. The report reveals some disparities tied to poverty on matters such as the availability of arts specialists and dedicated rooms with special equipment for arts instruction.

A smaller share of high-poverty schools (65 percent) than low-poverty schools (82 percent) had music rooms in 2009-10, for example. And arts specialists were employed to teach

music at 85 percent of high-poverty schools, compared with 98 percent of low-poverty schools.

Although more than half of low-poverty secondary schools offered five or more visual-arts courses in 2008-09, for the highest-poverty schools, that figure was just 22 percent.

That said, the report offers some evidence that schools in impoverished communities are gaining ground in the arts.

For one, the availability of weekly music instruction rose from 82 percent to 93 percent of high-poverty elementary schools. And dedicated rooms for both music and the visual arts have become more widely available in such schools. Visual-arts rooms were available in 59 percent of high-poverty elementary schools in 2009-10, up from 33 percent a decade earlier.

### **Benefits of Access**

Meanwhile, the new study from the National Endowment for the Arts finds that at-risk youths with a history of intensive arts experiences enjoy better academic outcomes and are more civically engaged than disadvantaged students who largely miss out on the arts.

The benefits can be seen across a variety of measures, from test scores and school grades to honors-society memberships, high school graduation, and college enrollment and attainment. Also, those young people are more likely to get involved in volunteer activities and local politics.

However, the report, drawing on data from several federal longitudinal databases, does not provide evidence that extensive arts engagement causes the positive outcomes. Rather, the two are associated.

"We don't know if, in fact, there is something [about] these kids that would prompt them to be more engaged in a variety of ways, including the arts," said Sunil Iyengar, the director of research and analysis at the endowment.

At the same time, he said the analysis reveals a "remarkable" level of consistency.

"In almost no case did we see anything counter [to this correlation]," he said.