

THE STATE OF ARTS EDUCATION IN COLORADO PUBLIC SCHOOLS GRADES PRE-K – 12

December 2025



think360
ARTS
FOR LEARNING



ARTS FOR BUSINESS
BUSINESS FOR ARTS





ARTS FOR BUSINESS
BUSINESS FOR ARTS

The State of Arts Education in Colorado Public Schools Grades Pre-K – 12

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	1
Arts Capacities and Benefits	3
Historical Context : National and State	7
Current Policies: National and State	10
Implementation Practices Impacting Access	14
Conclusion and Recommendations	17
Acknowledgements	19
Bibliography	21
Appendix A & B	22
Appendix C: Brief History of Colorado Policies Impacting Arts Education	23

This policy brief is supported in part by the **Bonfils-Stanton Foundation** and **Colorado Creative Industries** in the Office of Economic Development and International Trade.



Colorado
Creative
Industries



INTRODUCTION

Nederland Elementary, Nederland

Teaching and learning in the arts —dance, music, theatre, visual art— have long been an important part of Pre-K through Grade 12 public education. According to [federal statute](#), the arts are part of a well-rounded education. A substantive and sequential visual and performing arts curriculum addresses and develops ways of thinking, questioning, expression, and learning that complement learning in other subjects. Witnessing students experience arts learning is to observe active engagement in learning, creative and critical thinking skills, positive self-expression, comaraderie among peers, and joy.

The purpose of this paper is to inform state and local policymakers and the public of the status of arts education in Colorado public schools Pre-K through Grade 12 and to recommend overarching policy initiatives that will enable greater accountability and ensure quality, equity, and access for all students. The brief will provide a picture of the value and benefits, historic and current policy landscape, funding realities, and structural barriers to arts education. However, it is not a complete picture of student access and participation due to the limitations of such information, as described in detail throughout.

Access to quality arts education is not a given in American public schools. Though now widely recognized as a driver of positive outcomes in economic vitality, healthy communities, mental well-being, and success in school, access to arts education has been subjected to boom-and-bust economic cycles and changing political will over the past 40+ years. Colorado's response to federal education policies is a reflection of this shifting landscape, yet it lags behind many states that have enacted policies that benefit arts education.

Systems change in arts education is complex. Creative Learning Experiences (Arts Educators and Learners) are the heart of a systems change model, supported by three sectors —Education, Cultural, and Civic + Social. Within the three sectors are three *centers of influence* that drive change: Policy, Leadership, and Philanthropy (Schell, 2022).

The policy recommendations in this brief are primarily focused on the role of state policymakers in advancing arts education. That said, keep in mind that funders, parents, educators, artists, students, and school and community leaders all have essential roles to play.

This policy brief is a collaboration between Think 360 Arts for Learning (Think 360 Arts) and Colorado Business Committee for the Arts (CBCA). The rationale for the publication is threefold:

Public Demand: In 2024, CBCA published Colorado's Arts Policy Framework, a compilation of diverse perspectives on the value and potential of our state's creative community. It provides a coordinated, intentional and inclusive advocacy voice and roadmap for Colorado's arts & culture sector. Through a process of rigorous interviews, surveys, and focus groups, *arts education emerged as one of the four strategic priorities*. (See Appendix A)

Decline in Arts Educator Licensure: A recent study from Research Evaluation Consulting (REC), commissioned by Think 360 Arts for Learning and supported by a grant from the Bonfils-Stanton Foundation, finds a continued and concerning decline in the number of credentialed arts educators across the state between 2021 and 2024, with marked drops in Theatre and Visual Arts. The total number of credentialed arts teachers declined by 5%. On average, Colorado has one licensed arts teacher for every 254 students. Of Colorado's 187 school districts, 164 had no certified Dramatic Arts Teachers, 59 had no certified Music teachers, and 48 had no certified Visual Arts Teachers. (See Appendix B)

Data Limitations: Unlike 48 other states, Colorado does not collect data on course-level offerings in the arts across all districts or data on student participation in the arts (dance, music, theatre, visual arts). More data is needed to understand the full scope of the arts education landscape in Colorado and to better ensure access and equity.

What Colorado schools need now is a systematic examination of public policy initiatives that will support quality arts education programs and enable implementation of sequential and comprehensive courses of study in dance, music, theatre, and visual arts for each of Colorado's 881,000 public school students.

The briefing paper describes:

- Benefits of arts learning for every student
- National and state historical context
- Current policies in Colorado and nationwide supporting arts education in public schools
- Current implementation practices affecting equitable access
- Policy recommendations

ABOUT

THINK 360 ARTS FOR LEARNING

Think 360 Arts for Learning is Colorado's leading provider of K-12 arts education, integrating visual, performing, digital, and literary arts into classrooms and communities statewide. Since 1963, the organization has partnered with professional teaching artists to expand creative learning, strengthen school communities, and advance equity in education. Through its programs, Think 360 Arts engages students, educators, and families in the transformative power of the arts. Learn more at <https://think360arts.org>.

COLORADO BUSINESS COMMITTEE FOR THE ARTS

Colorado Business Committee for the Arts (CBCA) is a nonprofit that advances Colorado's creative economy by connecting arts and business. Since 1985, CBCA has been forging inspiring arts and business partnerships through advocacy, research, leadership development, training, volunteerism and arts engagement. CBCA envisions a Colorado where arts and business are integrated to catalyze and build strong and vibrant communities. Learn more at <https://cbca.org>.



ART CAPACITIES

Westridge Elementary School, Littleton

Arts Benefit Student Learning

The arts are crucial to building academic skills and life-long learning capacities with the goal of preparing all students for success after high school regardless of gender, age, economic status, physical or learning abilities. A comprehensive and sequential visual and performing arts curriculum addresses and develops ways of thinking, questioning, expression, and learning that complement learning in other subjects. A well taught arts curriculum benefits all areas of learning, including:

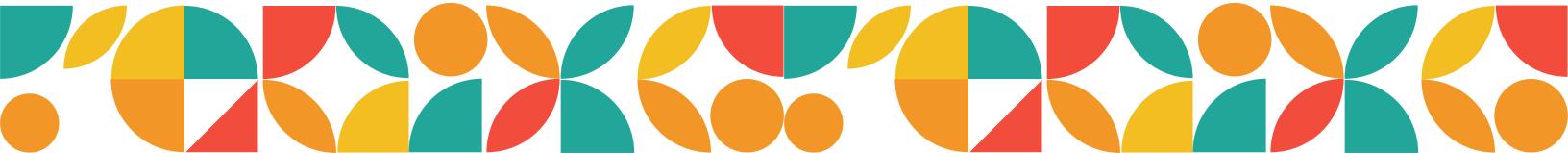
- Readiness for learning and creative thinking
- Cognitive outcomes
- Cultural understanding
- Social interaction and collaboration
- Positive mental health outcomes
- Preparation for the workforce and life-long learning

Recent studies in school districts in Boston and Houston underscore these benefits. A longitudinal study in Boston shows broad benefits in student engagement (attendance), school climate, and traditional academic outcomes (Bowen, 2021). In a study of 42 elementary and middle schools in Houston, Texas, research findings show a direct causal relationship linking access to arts education to reduction in disciplinary infractions, improvement in writing achievement, and increased students' emotional empathy. In addition, students experience increases in school engagement, college aspirations, and cognitive empathy (Bowen, 2023).

The benefits of an education in the arts have been researched extensively over the past several decades. Arts Education Partnership, composed of a national network of more than 200 organizations dedicated to advancing arts education, has aggregated an [extensive library](#) of research studies.
(Arts Education Partnership, n.d.)

Victoria Stevens, a licensed clinical psychologist and IPA certified psychoanalyst, as well as a classically trained cellist, singer, dancer, and actor, provides a summary analysis of the impact on student development with education and experience in the arts (Stevens, 2002).

DOMAIN	IMPACT ON STUDENT DEVELOPMENT
Cultural Understanding	<p>Facilitates the expression and appreciation of emotional experiences that are often non-verbal, and which provide individual and cultural ways of making meaning.</p> <p>Provides symbolic languages that give form to feelings, enabling those feelings to be represented and communicated—leading to self-discovery and a sense of efficacy.</p> <p>Allows students to appreciate great achievements throughout history and to learn about our global cultural heritage.</p> <p>Expands the capacity for imaginative “play” with ideas and the space to develop the ability to imagine possibilities.</p>
Disposition for Learning and Creative Thinking	<p>Encourages persistence, resilience, focus, self-discipline, and the ability to tolerate frustration in the solving of a particular artistic “problem” or the mastery of a skill.</p> <p>Encourages the ability to work with ambiguity, view mistakes as opportunities to learn and understand that there are multiple opinions and views about the same object, experience, or person.</p> <p>Promotes capacity to adapt to change and the ability to form verbal and non-verbal constructs, which facilitate the handling of complex problems involving many variables.</p>
Cognitive Outcomes	<p>Fosters verbal and spatial imagination and creativity.</p> <p>Allows for flexibility in thinking (analogical, metaphoric, for example).</p> <p>Promotes formation of non-verbal or verbal constructs which facilitate the handling of complex problems involving many variables.</p> <p>Enables recognition of a “whole” and therefore the ability to analyze the parts of a problem within a given context.</p>



Emotional Outcomes	<p>Creates a sense of agency; the experience of making or performing something created from oneself, which results in a sense of authentic achievement and pride (not the same thing as “self-esteem”).</p> <p>Fosters imaginative perspective taking and the ability to see similarities and differences between cultures, objects, or people which is the cognitive basis for empathy and compassion.</p> <p>Encourages the development of emotional self-regulation as the result of sustained attention, focus, and practice.</p>
Preparation for the Workforce and Life-long Learning	<p>Enables the ability to select which data are important out of masses of information, to synthesize the data, and to use those pieces of information in a way conducive to a larger goal within a quickly changing environment.</p>

Arts Learning Benefits the Economy

Learning in the arts translates into jobs and careers.

The arts are critical to economic and workforce development. Nationally, creative industries contribute \$1.17 trillion of value to our nation’s economy, which accounts for 4.24% of the U.S. economy, according to the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis. In Colorado, the creative sector generates \$19.7 billion (3.72% of our economy), which is fueled by over 121,000 jobs, greater than Mining, Transportation, Utilities or Agriculture. These arts workers hold positions in design, entertainment, media, technology, administration and beyond. In 2025, the Colorado Workforce Development Council (CWDC) unveiled a new “career pathway” in the Creative Industries in response to the increasing need and desire to grow our creative workforce. This new CWDC pathway includes two focus areas: Media Arts and Performing and Fine Arts.

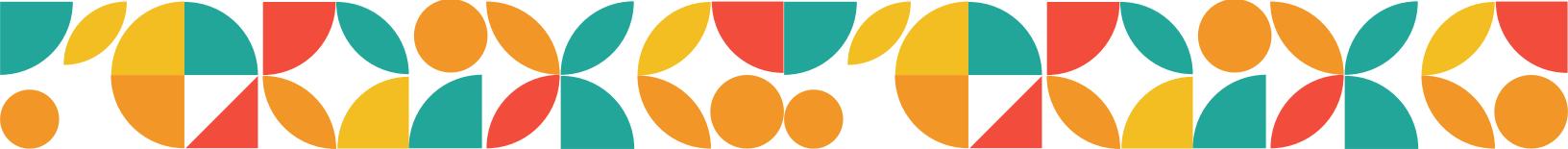
Arts learners become arts consumers.

Arts and culture also have a significant direct and *indirect* economic impact in local communities. In Colorado Business Committee for the Arts (CBCA)’s most recent Economic Activity Study of Metro Denver Culture, arts, cultural and scientific nonprofits generated \$3.12 billion in total economic activity for the seven-county Denver metro area. That economic activity includes direct and indirect spending from operations and audiences. In other words, every time someone participates in an activity at an arts & cultural venue, there is a tangible financial ripple effect in the local economy. According to Americans for the Arts’ Arts & Economic Prosperity 6 study, the average arts & culture participant “spends \$38.46 per person per event, in addition to the cost of event admission,” directly into the local economy (Americans for the Arts, 2022). This study also documents that one-third of attendees traveled from outside their county to attend a cultural event, and in those instances, their average spending was approximately twice their local counterparts. Cultural tourists regularly spend more and stay longer.

Arts education is a pipeline to workforce development.

A learning environment rich in the arts yields 21st century workforce skills critical to a range of industries and fields. According to the World Economic Forum's "The Future of Jobs" report, creativity was repeatedly listed as a necessary cognitive skill for our future global workforce, even in fields like transportation financial services. Other key skills and abilities included complex problem solving, oral and written expression, coordinating with others, and critical thinking – all of which can be honed and developed through participation in the arts (World Economic Forum, 2025).

Surveys of executives through The Conference Board have consistently shown creativity as one of the top desired skills that employers are seeking in their future workforce. As the national and global economy continues to evolve rapidly, the workforce of tomorrow need to be equipped with a broad set of capacities built on innovation, adaptability, creativity and communication. Consistent and high quality engagement in the arts at a young age will help to foster those future leaders in industry sectors including tech, design, business, marketing, education, and social impact.





HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Sabin World School, Denver

NATIONAL CONTEXT

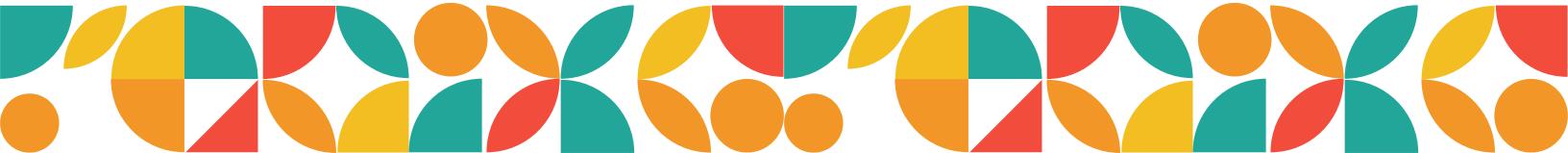
Arts education has been on a mostly upward trajectory since the 1970s through the diligence and perseverance of dedicated policymakers and advocates. Unlike reading and math, the arts are not universally available in American public schools. The arts education ecosystem, including a vast network of educators, policymakers, researchers, funders, parents, and community partners, have made great gains in advancing arts learning in public schools. Yet, landscape shifts with every budgetary and leadership cycle require ongoing advocacy efforts to win over hearts and minds.

These seminal events and policies demonstrate the ups and downs in arts education from the 1970s until present day:

YEAR	IMPACT
1978	
Proposition 13 in California	Limits property taxes for education, including funding for arts education. California's Prop 13 had a significant impact on other states, inspiring similar tax-limiting measures and contributing to a broader "tax revolt" across the country.
1989	
America 2000 Education Proposal	A national education strategy omitting the arts as a core subject.

1994	
Goals 2000 signed into law	A national education reform initiative codifying the arts as a core subject for the first time.
2001	
No Child Left Behind (NCLB)	Federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act requiring high stakes testing, effectively narrowing the curriculum and access to arts education.
2015	
Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)	Federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) emphasizing local control; music and the arts included as central to a well-rounded education. The inclusion of the arts in a well-rounded education signified support for new funding streams for arts education including Title I, II, III, IV-A. The local control aspect of the law has mixed results for the arts.
2020-2024	
Covid-19 Pandemic	Communities across the U.S. suffer learning loss, mental health decline, and reduced enrollment, negatively impacting the provision of arts education.
2025	
Uncertainty	Uncertainty regarding support from federal agencies for state education budgets and challenges to what can be taught have potentially far-reaching impact on teaching licensure, teacher hiring, professional learning, student support services, and nonprofit community partnerships.

* Titles I, II, III, and IV refer to federal funds for education that are allocated to the states.



STATE CONTEXT

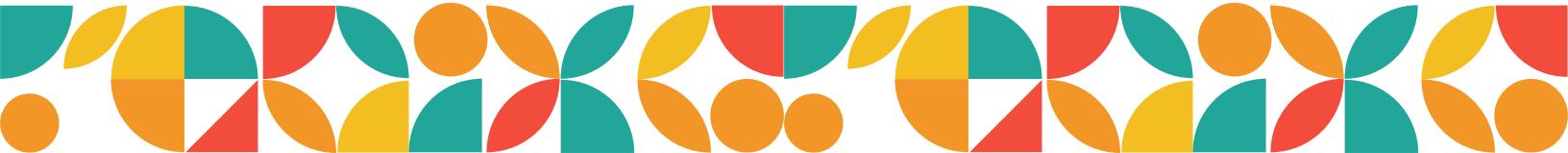
Arts education in Colorado over the past several decades is a reflection of the national landscape.

Local control = local variability. Because graduation requirements and course offerings are locally set, arts access depends on district priorities and resources. The state provides standards and a readiness framework; districts decide requirements and staffing. ([Colorado Department of Education](#))

Standards have kept the arts “in the frame.” Since 2009, the arts are fully embedded in the Colorado Academic Standards and updated in 2018 and 2022—a durable signal that the arts are core learning, not extras. Implementation, however, lives (and thrives) locally. ([Colorado Department of Education](#))

Public funding architecture matters. Taxpayer’s Bill of Rights (TABOR) and Amendment 23 (State Education Fund to stabilize K-12 education funding) shape the K-12 fiscal landscape. The Scientific and Cultural Facilities District (SCFD) uniquely augments arts learning and youth engagement in the Denver Metro via cultural partners. State arts policy moved under Colorado Creative Industries (CCI) to connect culture with economic development. Creative Districts strengthen place-based arts ecosystems that schools tap. ([Colorado General Assembly](#), [Colorado Public Radio](#), [The Colorado Sun](#), [statebillinfo.com](#))

(See Appendix C for a more complete timeline of Colorado policies.)





CURRENT POLICIES

Coal Creek Elementary, Louisville

NATIONAL POLICIES

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) emphasizes arts education as part of a "well-rounded education". This means that music and the arts are now explicitly recognized as essential components of a child's learning experience.

- **Funding:** ESSA includes various funding streams that can be used to support arts education, such as Title I funds (for disadvantaged students) and Title II funds (for teacher professional development), and Title IV Part A funds (for student support and academic enrichment grants).
- **Flexibility:** ESSA provides states and districts with flexibility in how they implement arts education programs, allowing them to tailor approaches to their specific needs and contexts.
- **Evidence-based practice:** ESSA encourages the use of evidence-based practices in arts education, meaning that programs should be supported by research and data demonstrating their effectiveness.
- **Integration with other subjects:** ESSA also supports the integration of arts with other subjects, such as STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics), creating opportunities for STEAM programs.
- **Progress monitoring:** ESSA requires states to monitor student progress in meeting state standards and to implement well-rounded programs, including arts education, to ensure all students receive a high-quality education. [Editor's note: Not all states are in compliance; accountability efforts are inconsistent.]
- **Advocacy:** ESSA highlights the importance of local and state advocacy for the arts and encourages collaboration among stakeholders, such as teachers, parents, and community organizations, to develop and implement effective arts education programs.

STATE POLICIES

A review of state policies impacting arts education shows that Colorado conforms with other states in arts standards and teacher licensure yet lags other states in several important instructional policy indicators:

- 41 states have an arts education instructional requirement at the elementary level. Colorado is one of 11 states that does not.
- 40 states have an arts education instructional requirement at the middle school level. Colorado is one of 12 states that does not.
- 41 states have an arts education instructional requirement at the high school level. Colorado is one of 11 states that does not. Arts courses and graduation requirements in the arts are “encouraged” but not required.

A description of current policies impacting arts education in Colorado follows, as compiled by Arts Education Partnership (Arts Education Partnership, 2025):

ARTS CORE AND STANDARD	COLORADO POLICIES
Early Childhood Arts Ed State Standards*	Colorado State Standards (2022)
ARTS INSTRUCTION	
Arts Ed Instructional Requirement – Elementary** [Editor’s Note: See Policy Recommendations]	Not found in statute or code.
Arts Ed Instructional Requirement – Middle School** [Editor’s Note: See Policy Recommendations]	Not found in statute or code.

ARTS INSTRUCTION	<p>Arts Ed Instructional Requirement – High School** [Editor's Note: See Policy Recommendations]</p> <p>Each local education provider shall review the curricula provided by the public high schools operated by the local education provider in the subject matter areas included in postsecondary and workforce readiness...(b) A local education provider may accommodate the range of student interests and aspirations by adopting multiple curricula that, combined, create multiple postsecondary and workforce readiness programs within a school district or within a high school that are designed to prepare a student for differing post-graduation goals, including but not limited to immediate entry into the workforce or matriculation into career and technical education or higher education. The local education provider shall ensure, however, that every postsecondary and workforce readiness program adopted by the local education provider: (II) Includes courses in visual arts and performing arts. (Colo. Rev. Stat. Ann. § 22-7-1015)</p>
HIGH SCHOOL REQUIREMENTS	
Arts Requirements for High School Graduation	Not found in statute or code.
Arts Requirement Alternatives for High School Graduation Requirement	Not found in statute or code.
Arts and STEAM Diploma Seals	Not found in statute or code.
LICENSURE	
Arts Requirements for Non-Arts Teacher Licensure	To be endorsed in elementary education, an applicant shall...have demonstrated the competencies specified below: 4.02(1) The elementary educator is knowledgeable about curriculum development and instruction and is able to: 4.02(1)(a) design and implement an integrated curriculum based upon adopted content standards including, but not limited to, language arts (e.g., reading, writing, speaking, listening), science, mathematics, social studies, the arts, health, physical education and technology. (1 Colo. Code Regs. § 301-101:4.02) <i>[Editor's note: Schools do not always require endorsements in dance or theatre. Some English and/or PE teachers teach theatre or dance without having the endorsement added to a credential.]</i>

Licensure Requirements for Arts Teachers	Endorsement Requirements... Visual Arts (Grades K-12) (1 Colo. Code Regs. § 301-101:4.04), Drama/Theatre Arts (Grades K-12) (1 Colo. Code Regs. § 301-101:4.07), Music (Grades K-12) (1 Colo. Code Regs. § 301-101:4.15), Dance (Grades K-12) (1 Colo. Code Regs. § 301-101:4.20)
OTHER	
State School for the Arts/Statewide Programs	Not found in statute or code.
Funding for Arts Education (Grants from CO Dept of Education for out of school time programs)	There is hereby created a grant program to fund before- and after-school arts-based and vocational activity programs for students enrolled in grades six through twelve. The goal in funding arts-based and vocational activity programs is to reduce the number of students who choose to drop out of school prior to graduation. (C.R.S. 22-27.5-103)
Other State Arts Ed Policies	<p>Each public school in the state is strongly encouraged to provide courses in visual arts and in performing arts, which courses shall be based on content standards for visual arts and performing arts and provided in compliance with state and federal law. School districts and public schools are strongly encouraged to explore and implement innovative delivery mechanisms for performing arts and visual arts courses, including but not limited to using on-site technology and software, on-line education, and collaboration among community colleges, other school districts or public schools, boards of cooperative services, and regional service areas. (Colo. Rev. Stat. Ann. § 22-1-104.5)</p> <p>Guidelines for High School Graduation Requirements: In developing the guidelines for high school graduation, the state board...shall: (VI.5) Recognize and acknowledge the importance of education in performing arts...and visual arts...in strengthening student learning in other subjects and in supporting students' ability to succeed in the twenty-first century (Colo. Rev. Stat. Ann. § 22-2-106)</p> <p>Student Graduation and Completion Plans: In designing its student graduation and completion plan, each high priority or priority local education provider is encouraged to: (a.5) Expand the availability of visual arts and performing arts courses and opportunities through the regular school curriculum and through increased access to extracurricular activities, including but not limited to entering into agreements with nonprofit or for profit community arts organizations to provide expanded visual arts and performing arts educational programs. (Colo. Rev. Stat. Ann. § 22-14-107)</p>

*Learning standards (or content standards) are broad learning goals that outline what students should know, understand, and be able to do in a content area (e.g., English/language arts, math, music, visual art, etc.) within a specific timeframe. They are not a specific curriculum or teaching method, but rather define the expected learning outcomes.

**Content standards are implemented through instructional requirements at the local or state level.



IMPLEMENTATION PRACTICES IMPACTING ACCESS

Westridge Elementary
School, Littleton

Teacher Licensure Decline

A recent study of the number of licensed arts teachers in Colorado shows a decline of 5% in the overall number over the past three years. The findings also show many school districts with no licensed arts teachers at all. Of Colorado's 187 school districts, 164 had no certified Dramatic Arts Teachers, 59 had no certified Music teachers, and 48 had no certified Visual Arts teachers.

The decline in licensure is an indicator of challenges in the teacher preparation pipeline. Fewer opportunities for jobs = fewer credentialed arts teachers = fewer students choosing arts education as a teaching career = less student access to the arts.

The findings of the research are complicated by the fact that schools may not require endorsements in theatre or dance to teach those subjects, which speaks to the need for more reliable data.

A school may be offering classes in those subject areas; however, the licensure numbers would not indicate the offering if endorsements were not added to the teaching credential (in English or Physical Education, for example.). Overall, we know that teacher licensure is not, in itself, an accurate proxy for student access and participation.

Budget Uncertainty

School districts must pass an annual budget that depends in part on federal and state funding. In normal times, districts could rely on long-held formulas for the distribution of federal Title I, II, III, IV funds, which are additional resources for schools with high percentages of low-income families. There is great uncertainty about available federal funds for the 2025-26 school year and beyond. The uncertainty has a ripple effect, with districts having to prioritize essential staff and services which may lead ultimately to difficult decisions regarding arts instruction.

Local Control

The Federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) emphasizes local control—empowering education decisions to be made by local education agencies (LEA) within the guideposts of federal and state laws. The legacy of the local control movement is a shift from statewide to districtwide to schoolwide decision making

The autonomy of building-level principals has resulted in school-by-school decision making in some cases. It is possible to find schools with a thriving arts program and schools with limited or no access to arts classes—all within the same school district.

Colorado District and School Performance Rating

The Colorado Department of Education uses performance ratings to make decisions on supporting struggling schools, using quantitative data—academic achievement on standardized tests, academic growth, and postsecondary and workforce readiness—to assign a performance score (Colorado General Assembly, 2022). The primary focus of these ratings is on academic achievement and growth in core subjects, which may lead to prioritization of resources in those areas. The system does not explicitly include arts education as a direct criterion for evaluating school performance, resulting in indirect impacts on arts education through resource allocation and implied diminishment of value. Some states do include the arts in performance ratings, notably Connecticut, Michigan, Washington, and Rhode Island.

While research indicates no direct positive or negative effect found on English Language Arts or math test scores due to arts education (Bowen, D., 2023), the system's focus on academic achievement in core subjects can influence the prioritization of resources (staffing, scheduling, facilities, supplies/materials, etc.). [Editor's Note: The Houston large scale study does show the arts boost students' writing skills, build social and emotional skills, and increase school engagement.]

Data Limitations

A decline in the total number of credentialed arts teachers would suggest a decline in the number of students with access to arts classes and a concomitant decline in the teacher preparation pipeline. Of equal or greater concern is that the relevant data is not available statewide, so a full picture of student access and participation is not discoverable currently. Anecdotal evidence suggests that arts teacher positions are at risk of non-renewal; however, there is no definitive data to give a complete picture. There are several factors that may influence the collection of data needed to determine gaps in access to and participation in arts education. [Editor's Note: The following is a synthesis of conversations with practitioners unless otherwise noted. A formal study of the limiting factors is not available currently.]

- According to Education Commission of the States (ECS), Statewide Longitudinal Data Systems (SLDS) policies and resources have been established in 33 states, with 9 under construction, and 9 not found. Colorado's system is under construction as part of a federal grant beginning in 2019. The purpose of longitudinal data systems is to enable states to support policymakers in driving systemic improvements.



- Colorado's SLDS system is currently under construction. When operationalized, the system will aggregate existing data sources with the goal of connecting education programs to workforce outcomes. The system is not designed to collect new data nor is it designed to collect data on student access and participation in content areas, such as the arts (Education Commission of the States, June 2024).
- In 2019, a bill was passed -- Colorado Revised Statutes Title 22. Education 22-11-503.5, collecting data on student performance by course level. The law connects participation data with performance on statewide assessments to show significant differences in student proficiency or disproportionate participation by student groups in certain course levels. The purpose is to guide conversations at the school and district level to improve student outcomes by placing more students in high-achieving courses and modifying or eliminating underperforming ones. The law requires collection of student data in "core courses" – English, mathematics, science, or social studies at the middle or high school level. No statewide data is collected on the arts.
- Colorado's education system is built on a decentralized structure, which allows individual school districts significant autonomy in decision-making. While this local flexibility supports responsiveness to community needs, it can present challenges for gathering consistent, statewide data. Districts may use varied data collection systems, and any data requested at the state level undergoes a complex and time-intensive validation process by the Colorado Department of Education.





CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Fort Morgan High School, Fort Morgan

The arts—dance, music, theatre, and visual art—are an essential part of a well-rounded education according to federal law. A well taught arts curriculum benefits all areas of learning, including cognitive outcomes, cultural understanding, social interaction and collaboration, positive mental health outcomes, and preparation for the workforce and life-long learning.

While there is established precedent for local control of education, research findings and anecdotal evidence demonstrate that the arts are among the subjects that may be negatively impacted by local control. In Colorado, the arts are neither required nor tested.

Arts instruction is vulnerable to shifting local priorities. Without clear statewide guidance that ascribes value to and support for arts education, the delivery of arts instruction will remain inconsistent, driven by factors such as community wealth rather than by a desire for equitable access.

Think 360 Arts and CBCA recommend a broad policy initiative that will support the essential role of the arts in improving student achievement and well-being, developing Colorado's creative industries, and building a workforce capable of competing in a knowledge-based global economy.

Implementing these policies will require a robust multi-phased, multi-faceted dynamic approach in concert with policymakers, stakeholders, and practitioners.

Policy Recommendations:

Recognition of Value

The State of Colorado shall recognize the value of arts education as a core subject through programs such as an annual designation of Arts Education Month, Seal of the Arts graduation endorsement for high school students, and designating the arts as a performance indicator in the school's annual report card.

Access and Equity

Every school Pre-K through Grade 12 shall provide standards-based instruction in the visual and performing arts (dance, music, theatre, visual art) through new and/or revised instructional requirement statutes.

Accountability

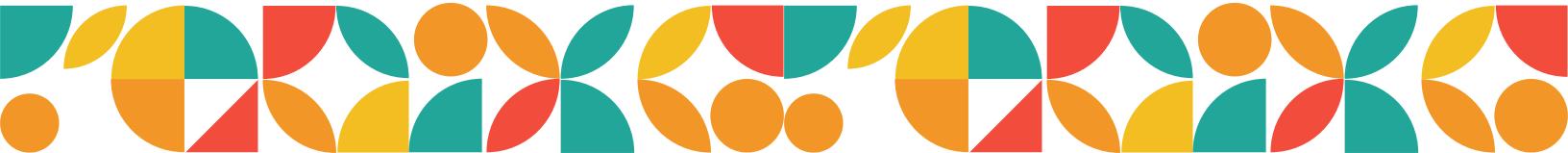
The State of Colorado shall develop and implement a statewide data system to create a dashboard of arts participation and access data by grade level and content area (dance, music, theatre, visual art). Every Local Education Agency shall participate in the statewide data system. Such data will aid in identifying areas that may need additional support for enhancing student access to participation in arts courses. Data will enable further research and more targeted effective strategies for the delivery of arts education for all Colorado students.

Implementation Support Systems

Colorado Department of Education and other regulatory agencies shall provide optimum program standards to ensure quality instruction in the arts and shall provide expanded technical support for districts in areas such as curriculum and scheduling, facilities, funding for arts programs, staffing, materials and equipment, and professional learning.

Teacher Preparation

The State of Colorado, in coordination with institutions of higher education, shall establish new opportunities, pathways, and incentives to facilitate workforce development and increase arts teacher licensure.





ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Sabin World School, Denver

We are grateful to the [Bonfils-Stanton Foundation](#) and [Colorado Creative Industries in the Office of Economic Development and International Trade](#) for their support of our ongoing work to advocate for arts education in Colorado. We extend thanks and appreciation also to the following organizations and individuals who have provided thoughtful guidance and support in the development of this paper:

Carla Aguilar, Colorado Department of Education

Beau Augustin, Denver Public Schools, Colorado Thespians

Josh Blanchard, Colorado Creative Industries

Daizha Brown, Arts Education Partnership

Mitra Chamanbahar, Arts Education Partnership

Christin Crampton Day, Colorado Business Committee for the Arts

Anna Feiss, The Arts Campus at Willits

Christina Goletti, University of Northern Colorado

Celia Gottlieb, Empowered, Ltd.

Seth Harris, Artist, Think 360 Arts

Dr. Ingrid Larragoity-Martin, El Sistema Colorado

Angela Keedy, University of Northern Colorado, National Association for Music Education

Jessica Kostelnik, Office of Governor Polis

Tami Losasso, Colorado Department of Education, Colorado Thespians

Jesse Martinez, Empowered, Ltd.

Bob Morrison, Quadrant Research

Melissa O'Rear, Cultural Office Pikes Peak Region

Dennis Robinson, Opera Colorado

Kristi Stice, Music Lesson Cafe

Alejandra Vargas, Children's Museum Denver

Ruth Wilson, Colorado Creative Industries

Arts Education Partnership

Colorado Business Committee for the Arts

Think 360 Arts for Learning

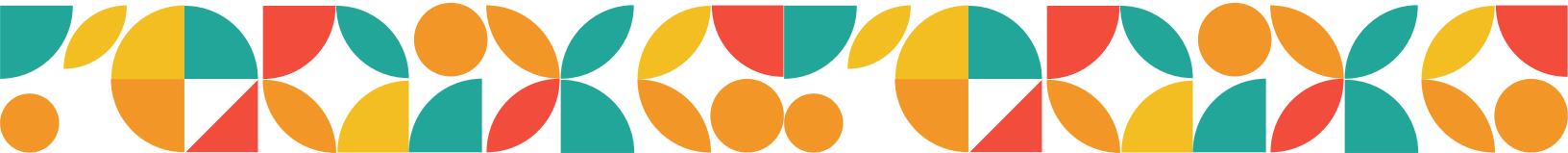
Authors:

Meredith Badler, [Colorado Business Committee for the Arts](#)

Daisy Fodness-McGowan, RiNo Arts District (formerly with [Think 360 Arts for Learning](#))

Laurie T. Schell, [Elevate Arts Ed](#)

Design and layout: Bethany Laffan, [Think 360 Arts for Learning](#)





BIBLIOGRAPHY

Coal Creek Elementary, Louisville

Americans for the Arts (n.d.). [*ESSA and Arts Education – 7 Basics to Know*](#)

Americans for the Arts (2022). [*Arts and Economic Prosperity 6*](#). (retrieved 10/20/25)

Arts Education Partnership (2019). [*ESSA: Mapping Opportunities for the Arts*](#)

Arts Education Partnership ((2025). *ArtScan State Profile*. <https://reports.ecs.org/comparisons/view-by-state/1117/CO> (retrieved 9/1/2025).

Arts Education Partnership (n.d.). *ArtsEd Search* <https://artsedsearch.org> (retrieved 10/26/25).

Bowen, D. H., & Kisida, B. (2023). Investigating Arts Education Effects on School Engagement and Climate. *Educational Policy*, 38(5), 1077-1107. <https://doi.org/10.1177/08959048231174880> (Original work published 2024)

Bowen, D. (2021). *The Arts Advantage: Impacts of Arts Education on Boston Students*. EdVestors. Colorado General Assembly. (2022, November 15). *Evaluation of Colorado's K-12 Accountability System*. https://leg.colorado.gov/sites/default/files/documents/audits/2160p_k-12_education_evaluation_report_final_11-15-2022.pdf

Education Commission of the States (updated June 2024). *50 State Comparison: Statewide Longitudinal Data Systems*. <https://www.ecs.org/50-state-comparison-statewide-longitudinal-data-systems-2024/>

Schell, L. T. (2022) Systems Change in Arts Education. *Creative Generation Journal*, 3:1, 25-33, DOI: 10.511631/creative-gen014 <https://www.elevateartsed.org/blog/systems-change-in-arts-education>

Stevens, V. (2002, May). *Schooling the unconscious imagination: Psychoanalytic and neurobiological theories of child development, aesthetics and education*. Paper presented at the James Grotstein Annual Conference: New Directions in Child Development, Los Angeles, CA.

World Economic Forum (2025). *The Future of Jobs Report 2025*. <https://www.weforum.org/publications/the-future-of-jobs-report-2025>



APPENDIX A & B

Swanson Elementary School, Arvada

Appendix A

[Colorado's Arts Policy Framework](#) and [Framework Infographic](#)

Appendix B

[Research Report: Colorado Arts Educator Licensure Continues Decline](#)





APPENDIX C

Fort Morgan High School, Fort Morgan

A Brief Recent History of Arts Education in Colorado (1970s–Present)

1970s–1980s: Foundations and a Regional Funding Model Emerges

Local control stays paramount. Colorado continues its tradition of local control over curriculum and graduation requirements, which means arts access varies by district—then and now. (See the state’s guidance on graduation guidelines and local control embedded in implementation materials.) ([Colorado Department of Education, Aurora Institute](#))

1988: SCFD is born. Denver Metro voters approve the Scientific and Cultural Facilities District (SCFD)—a 0.1% sales-and-use tax across seven counties—to support hundreds of cultural organizations, indirectly strengthening K–12 arts experiences via museum/symphony/theater education programs and field trips. Voters later renewed it in 1994, 2004, and 2016; the current authorization runs to June 30, 2030.

([Colorado Public Radio, Denverite, adcogov.org](#))

1990s: Standards Era Dawns; Fiscal Constraints Tighten

Early standards work begins. Colorado starts building state academic standards in the 1990s, part of a national move toward standards-based education. (Colorado School Boards Association overview.) ([casb.org](#))

1992: TABOR. The Taxpayer’s Bill of Rights (TABOR) caps revenues and requires refunds unless voters say otherwise. This shapes school funding for decades, intensifying tradeoffs that often squeeze non-tested subjects like the arts. 2000’s Amendment 23 creates a State Education Fund to stabilize K–12 funding, but the dynamic tension remains. ([Colorado General Assembly, The Bell Policy Center, Economic Policy Institute](#))

2000s: Comprehensive Standards and Assessment Alignment

2008 CAP4K (SB 08-212): The Preschool to Postsecondary Alignment Act directs a full overhaul of standards to align with “postsecondary and workforce readiness,” leading to the December 2009 adoption of the Colorado Academic Standards (CAS)—including Dance; Drama & Theatre Arts; Music; Visual Arts. This formally places the arts in Colorado’s P–12 standards framework. ([Colorado Department of Education, Colorado Department of Education](#))

2010–2014: State Arts Agency Reframed; Creative Districts Launched; Educator Evaluation

2010: The state arts agency is reconstituted as Colorado Creative Industries (CCI) within the Office of Economic Development & International Trade, signaling a strategic linkage between arts, culture, and the economy. ([The Colorado Sun](#))

2011 & 2013: The legislature establishes and then strengthens Creative Districts (HB11-1031; HB13-1208), offering certification and tools for communities. These districts often braid arts learning with place-based cultural assets, influencing partnerships and pipelines for student programs. ([statebillinfo.com](#), [Colorado OEDIT](#))

2010–2013: SB 10-191 overhauls educator evaluation, implementing statewide expectations for teacher/principal effectiveness; arts teachers are evaluated within this system, affecting professional practice and development. ([Colorado Department of Education](#), [CBOCES INNOVATIVE EDUCATION SERVICES](#))

2015–2018: Graduation Guidelines and Arts Standards Refresh

Graduation Guidelines: Adopted mid-2010s and fully implemented for the Class of 2022, Colorado requires students to demonstrate readiness (menu of options) rather than a fixed statewide credit count. Districts retain control over specific course requirements (e.g., whether arts credits are required), which contributes to variation in arts access. ([Colorado Department of Education](#))

2018 Standards Review: The state completes a standards review cycle, updating the arts content standards; these are then presented in new formats and tools for educators. ([Colorado Department of Education](#))

2020–2022: Pandemic Disruption and Standards Update

COVID-19 impacts: School closures, remote learning, and health protocols disrupt performance-based classes most of all—music, theatre, dance—complicating ensemble work, performances, and hands-on studio practice. Federal ESSER funds help districts respond, but recovery is uneven. ([U.S. Department of Education](#), [NBER](#), [Colorado Department of Education](#))

2022 Arts Standards Adoption: Colorado updates and re-adopts the Visual and Performing Arts standards (Dance, Drama/Theatre, Music, Visual Arts), refreshing the framework for curriculum and assessment. ([Colorado Department of Education](#))

2023–Present: Sustaining Infrastructure, Equity, and Local Choice

SCFD continues to support out-of-school arts learning (field trips, residencies, teen programs) for the Denver Metro, while statewide, CCI's Creative Districts and new budget moves keep linking arts, workforce, and community vitality. ([Douglas County](#), [Colorado General Assembly](#))

Regular standards review cycles (about every six years) keep arts standards current, but district-level decisions (schedules, staffing, credit policies) remain the decisive lever on equitable arts access across Colorado's mix of rural, suburban, and urban settings. ([Colorado Department of Education](#))

