

PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT AND EDUCATION

BUILDING PUBLIC WILL FOR ARTS AND CULTURE

Introduction

Public support for arts and culture is not created solely through policy advocacy, communications campaigns, or funding initiatives. It is built through relationships. When residents experience the arts in their neighborhoods, celebrate local creativity with their families, participate in community conversations, or see their children perform, exhibit, or create, they begin to understand the value of arts and culture in tangible and personal ways.

For this reason, public engagement is one of the most powerful—and often overlooked—forms of arts advocacy. Effective public engagement does more than increase attendance at events or improve organizational visibility. It cultivates trust, builds civic participation, creates new advocates, and establishes arts and culture as an essential part of community life.

Across Colorado, communities have demonstrated that successful public engagement efforts share several characteristics. They invite broad participation, remove barriers to access, build partnerships across sectors, and create opportunities for residents to see themselves reflected in local cultural life. Importantly, they also connect individual experiences to broader civic goals, helping residents understand how public investment in arts and culture contributes to community health and wellness, education, economic vitality, community identity, and quality of life.

The research assembled for this guide demonstrates that public engagement functions simultaneously as an advocacy strategy and a community-building tool. Festivals, public exhibitions, candidate forums, listening sessions, grassroots campaigns, and educational initiatives all help residents develop a stronger sense of ownership over their community's creative life. Over time, these experiences build the public will necessary to sustain policy change and public investment.

This chapter explores how Colorado communities have successfully engaged residents in arts advocacy through recurring public programs, cross-sector partnerships, education initiatives, and community-driven campaigns. While the examples vary in scale and geography, they share a common lesson: lasting advocacy begins long before a vote is taken or a funding request is made. It begins by creating meaningful opportunities for people to participate.

CONTENTS

Introduction

Public Engagement Is More Than Public Relations

Lessons for Colorado Communities

Case Study
Greeley Youth Arts Month

Case Study
Steamboat Springs

National Spotlight:
California
Proposition 28

Strategies for
Meaningful
Public Engagement

Common Challenges

Resources
Advocates Need

Try This, Advocates!



In Partnership with



With Support from



Developed by

scansion

Public Engagement Is More Than Public Relations

Many organizations think about public engagement primarily as communications—marketing events, promoting programs, or increasing attendance. While these activities are important, they represent only one dimension of engagement.

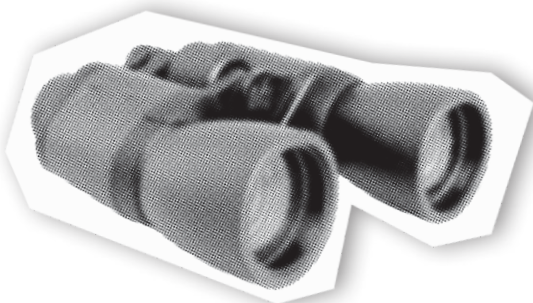
Authentic public engagement invites people into the life of a community. It creates opportunities for dialogue, shared experiences, learning, and collective ownership. Rather than asking residents to support the arts from a distance, effective engagement allows them to experience firsthand how creativity enriches neighborhoods, schools, businesses, and public spaces.

This distinction is particularly important for advocacy organizations. Public awareness alone rarely produces policy change. Public participation, however, creates relationships between residents, civic leaders, artists, educators, and local businesses that strengthen advocacy over time.

Across the case studies featured in this chapter, successful initiatives consistently demonstrate four principles:

- * **Visibility.** Arts and culture are made highly visible within everyday community life rather than confined to traditional cultural venues.
- * **Participation.** Residents are invited to engage directly through exhibitions, performances, festivals, public conversations, and volunteer opportunities.
- * **Partnership.** Schools, local governments, businesses, nonprofit organizations, and community groups collaborate around shared goals.
- * **Consistency.** Engagement occurs year after year, creating traditions that strengthen community identity while gradually building public support for arts investment.

These principles transform arts advocacy from a series of isolated campaigns into an ongoing civic practice.



Lessons for Colorado Communities



The experiences documented throughout this chapter suggest several practical lessons for organizations seeking to strengthen public engagement and education.

1

Build Public Will Before Seeking Public Investment

Communities are more likely to support arts funding when residents already have meaningful relationships with local artists, cultural organizations, and creative experiences. Engagement should precede major advocacy campaigns rather than accompany them.

2

Make Young People Visible

Youth arts initiatives accomplish far more than arts education. They engage families, activate businesses, strengthen school partnerships, and demonstrate the public value of creative learning. Student work displayed throughout a community often becomes one of the most persuasive forms of arts advocacy.

3

Treat Businesses as Community Partners

Local businesses benefit when arts programming attracts visitors, activates commercial districts, and strengthens community identity. Engaging business owners as partners rather than sponsors creates stronger and more durable advocacy coalitions.

4

Invest in Trusted Messengers

Teachers, librarians, neighborhood leaders, artists, and community volunteers often possess greater credibility than institutional communications alone. Personal invitations and local relationships remain among the most effective engagement strategies.

5

Tell Stories That Reflect Community Values

Successful advocacy combines evidence with stories that demonstrate how arts and culture contribute to education, community identity, economic vitality, belonging, and quality of life. Residents support initiatives that clearly connect to their own experiences and aspirations.

6

Think Beyond Individual Events

Festivals, exhibitions, listening sessions, and public forums should be viewed as components of a larger engagement strategy. The objective is not simply successful programming but the gradual development of a community that sees arts and culture as an essential part of civic life.

CASE STUDY

Greeley Youth Arts Month

Celebrating Student Creativity With Full Community Support

COMMUNITY CONTEXT

Greeley provides one of Colorado's strongest examples of how recurring public celebrations can simultaneously strengthen arts education, activate downtown businesses, and cultivate long-term community support for the arts.

Home to approximately 115,000 residents, Greeley is a growing regional center with a younger-than-average population supported by the presence of the University of Northern Colorado and Aims Community College. The city includes significant Spanish-speaking and refugee communities, contributing to a rich cultural landscape while also presenting important opportunities—and responsibilities—for inclusive public engagement.

Like many Colorado communities, Greeley faces affordability challenges that affect access to arts education and cultural participation. Yet the city's history demonstrates that creativity has long been part of its civic identity. From its Union Colony origins through the development of longstanding cultural institutions, Greeley has consistently balanced its agricultural heritage with a commitment to arts and culture. This combination of strong community identity, educational institutions, engaged local government, and an active creative district created favorable conditions for innovative public engagement strategies.



COMMUNITY TYPE:

Rural / Regional

PRIMARY ADVOCACY STRATEGY:

Community Engagement

KEY STAKEHOLDERS:

Local Government / Education
Partners / Business Community

TRANSFERABILITY:

High

RECOGNIZING THE OPPORTUNITY

Youth Arts Month emerged on a First Friday in March 2017 in response to a practical challenge facing many communities: declining access to arts education, particularly at the middle-school level. It celebrated its tenth year in March 2026.

Local leaders recognized that fewer opportunities for arts learning meant fewer opportunities for young people to develop creative skills, experience public recognition, and connect with the broader community through artistic expression. At the same time, downtown businesses sought additional strategies for attracting families and increasing activity in the city center.

Rather than treating these as separate issues, organizers developed a program that addressed both educational and economic goals. Student artwork would be exhibited throughout downtown businesses, creating an accessible, citywide gallery while encouraging families to explore local shops, restaurants, and public spaces.

The initiative also responded to broader questions of belonging. By moving student artwork beyond school buildings and into highly visible community settings, Youth Arts Month made creative achievement accessible to students and families who might not otherwise participate in traditional arts venues. Public exhibitions celebrated student success while reinforcing the message that creativity belongs in everyday community life.

Building a Coalition Around Youth Creativity

One of the most notable aspects of Youth Arts Month is the breadth of its partnerships. Rather than relying on a single organization, the initiative distributes leadership across multiple sectors, ensuring that responsibility—and ownership—is shared throughout the community.

The Greeley Creative District coordinates the overall initiative, working closely with the City of Greeley, Downtown Development Authority, Greeley-Evans School District 6, teachers, downtown businesses, and community volunteers. The City provides funding, communications support, and formal recognition through a memorandum of understanding, lending institutional credibility to the program while reinforcing its importance as a civic initiative.

Teachers serve as the program's primary ambassadors. Beyond selecting and preparing student artwork, they connect directly with families, encourage participation, and create the relationships that make the event successful. Downtown businesses contribute exhibition space, transforming storefronts, restaurants, and offices into temporary galleries that invite residents to experience student creativity as they move through the city.

This distributed leadership model offers an important lesson for advocates. Public engagement is strongest when many organizations contribute according to their own strengths rather than expecting a single institution to manage every aspect of a program. Schools provide educational expertise, businesses contribute public visibility, municipalities offer legitimacy and resources, and nonprofit organizations coordinate implementation. Together, these partners create an initiative that no single organization could achieve independently.

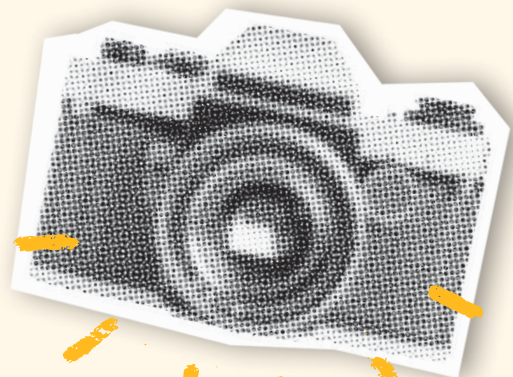


Engagement by Design

Youth Arts Month succeeds because every aspect of the program is intentionally designed to reduce barriers to participation.

Student artwork is displayed where families already gather rather than requiring residents to visit museums or galleries. Downtown businesses become welcoming cultural spaces. Teachers communicate directly with parents, recognizing that trusted personal relationships remain one of the most effective forms of outreach.

Organizers also acknowledge that engagement requires communication strategies that reflect the community being served. Because Greeley includes a large bilingual population, the Creative District developed bilingual promotional materials, brochures, maps, posters, and teacher communications. Standardized outreach materials help reduce demands on educators



while ensuring consistent messaging throughout the community. Rather than relying exclusively on digital advertising, organizers combine social media with neighborhood-based outreach, recognizing that effective engagement requires multiple channels of communication.

These decisions may appear operational, but together they reflect an important philosophy: successful public engagement is rarely accidental. It is intentionally designed to make participation welcoming, visible, and accessible for as many residents as possible.

Results: Creating a Culture of Participation

Over time, Youth Arts Month has evolved from a visual arts exhibition into a broader community celebration of student creativity. By incorporating music, theater, and other performing arts through partnerships with organizations such as the LINC Library Innovation Center, the initiative has expanded opportunities for participation while increasing public visibility for multiple artistic disciplines. This evolution reflects an important principle of successful public engagement: programs must continue to adapt as community needs and opportunities change.

The impact of Youth Arts Month extends well beyond the annual event itself.

For students, the program provides public recognition for creative achievement and reinforces the idea that their artistic contributions are valued by the broader community. Displaying artwork in local businesses transforms everyday spaces into places of celebration, giving young artists an audience that extends beyond classrooms and families.

Perhaps the most important outcome, however, is cultural rather than programmatic. By returning each year, Youth Arts Month has become part of Greeley's civic calendar.

For parents and caregivers, the event creates an accessible opportunity to engage with both their children's schools and the downtown business district. Families who may not regularly visit galleries or cultural institutions experience arts participation as part of everyday civic life.

For businesses, Youth Arts Month increases foot traffic while strengthening relationships with residents and schools. Storefronts become community gathering places, illustrating how arts programming can contribute to local economic activity without requiring major infrastructure investments.

For the Creative District, the initiative has become part of a broader strategy for nurturing the creative life cycle. Organizers recognized that participation in the arts often declines during adolescence and again following high school graduation. In response, they expanded programming to include youth day camps and an emerging artist residency that provides affordable membership opportunities and professional development for young creatives. Rather than treating Youth Arts Month as a standalone event, they positioned it within a continuum of engagement that supports creative development from childhood into adulthood.

Perhaps the most important outcome, however, is cultural rather than programmatic. By returning each year, Youth Arts Month has become part of Greeley's civic calendar—a tradition that residents anticipate and identify with. The event demonstrates that recurring public engagement initiatives can gradually reshape community expectations, making arts participation a visible and valued component of civic life.



CASE STUDY

Shared Vision in Steamboat Springs

Building Community Investment Through Partnership and Shared Stewardship

COMMUNITY CONTEXT

Steamboat Springs presents a different model of public engagement—one shaped by the opportunities and constraints of a rural mountain community whose economy is closely tied to tourism, recreation, and seasonal visitation.

Although the city's permanent population is approximately 13,000 residents, that number expands significantly during peak tourism seasons. Alongside skiing, ranching, and outdoor recreation, arts and culture have become important contributors to the region's identity and economy. Longstanding institutions such as Perry-Mansfield Performing Arts School and Camp, Steamboat Creates, the Strings Music Festival, as well as numerous galleries, performing arts organizations, and museums have established a strong cultural foundation that continues to evolve.

In recent years, local organizations have also begun exploring connections between arts participation and mental health, illustrating how the community increasingly views arts and culture as contributors to overall community well-being rather than solely as entertainment or tourism amenities.

FROM ORGANIZATIONAL SUPPORT TO COMMUNITY INVESTMENT

Like many communities, Steamboat Springs faced an important question: how should public resources be invested in nonprofit organizations that contribute to community life?

Rather than establishing a funding program exclusively for the arts, city leaders developed the Community Support Funding grant program that situates cultural organizations alongside other community-serving sectors. Municipal funding is distributed across multiple

COMMUNITY TYPE:

Rural / Mountain

PRIMARY ADVOCACY STRATEGY:

Policy Change Coalition Building /
Community Engagement /
Creative Placemaking

KEY STAKEHOLDERS:

Arts Organizations / Local Government
/ Business Community / Residents /
Philanthropy

TRANSFERABILITY:

Medium

priority areas—including health and human services, arts and culture, and environmental organizations—through a competitive process that reflects broader community goals.

This approach carries important implications for arts advocates. Rather than positioning arts organizations as exceptions requiring special consideration, the grant program recognizes them as essential civic partners working alongside other nonprofit institutions to improve quality of life.

The model also benefits from partnerships with organizations such as the Yampa Valley Community Foundation, which increases both grant visibility and connections to private philanthropy. Public investment and charitable giving reinforce one another, creating a more diversified support system for the region's creative sector.



Building a Collaborative Advocacy Network

One of Steamboat Springs' greatest strengths lies in the relationships among its cultural organizations.

Rather than operating independently, executive directors from organizations including Opera Steamboat, Steamboat Dance Theatre, Piknik Theatre, Steamboat Creates and Wildhorse Arts & Cinema, museums, and other institutions regularly collaborate through the Performing Arts Alliance. The alliance provides a forum for discussing shared challenges such as workforce housing, staffing shortages, organizational sustainability, and long-term planning.

This collaborative structure reflects an important lesson for communities of every size. Advocacy is strengthened when organizations first develop trust with one another before approaching policymakers. Speaking with a coordinated voice allows organizations to focus on shared priorities while reducing duplication of effort and competition for limited public attention.

At the same time, Steamboat Springs illustrates that successful collaboration does not eliminate the need for continued public education. Community leaders noted that municipal leaders have not always viewed arts and culture as significant economic drivers. Consequently, advocacy efforts continue to emphasize the sector's contributions to tourism, community identity, local business activity, and quality of life. Public engagement therefore becomes an ongoing educational process rather than a one-time campaign.

Engagement Through Visioning

Perhaps the most ambitious example of community engagement in Steamboat Springs centers on the development of a future performing arts center.

Rather than beginning with architectural plans, local leaders first conducted a feasibility study to understand unmet community needs. That work ultimately led to the formation of Wildhorse Arts & Cinema (formerly Undiscovered Earth), an organization dedicated to exploring sustainable models for long-term cultural infrastructure.

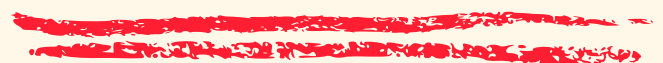
Importantly, the project has emphasized public conversation rather than predetermined solutions.

Community discussions have explored questions including:

- * How can a performing arts center serve residents throughout the year rather than only visitors?
- * What financing strategies would allow facilities to remain affordable and accessible?
- * How might rehearsal spaces, nonprofit offices, conference facilities, childcare, and community gathering spaces coexist within a single civic destination?
- * What role should municipal government play alongside nonprofit organizations in financing and operating cultural infrastructure?

These conversations demonstrate that public engagement is not limited to celebrating existing programs. It also creates space for residents to imagine future possibilities together. By inviting community members into the planning process, advocates help transform large capital projects from organizational aspirations into shared civic investments.

The proposed facility reflects this philosophy. Rather than envisioning an exclusive performance venue, organizers describe it as a welcoming community "living room"—a place where residents of all ages can gather for performances, education, meetings, childcare, and civic life. This language is itself a form of advocacy, reframing cultural infrastructure as public infrastructure that belongs to the entire community.



National Spotlight: California Proposition 28

Building Public Will for Arts Education

While the previous case studies illustrate local approaches to public engagement, California's Proposition 28 demonstrates how sustained public education and coalition building can reshape statewide policy.

Approved by voters in 2022, Proposition 28—the Arts and Music in Schools Funding Guarantee and Accountability Act—established a permanent funding stream dedicated to expanding arts education in California's public schools. Rather than relying on periodic appropriations, the measure guarantees annual funding to supplement, rather than replace, existing arts education investments. The legislation also incorporates accountability requirements, including annual public reporting on expenditures, staffing, student participation, and program offerings.

Although Colorado's policy environment differs from California's, Proposition 28 offers valuable lessons about public engagement and advocacy.

First, successful policy campaigns rarely begin with legislation. Proposition 28 was preceded by years of coalition building among educators, parents, artists, school leaders, nonprofit organizations, and statewide advocacy groups. These partners invested significant effort in educating communities about the educational, economic, and developmental benefits of arts learning before asking voters to approve new funding.

Second, the campaign framed arts education as an issue of educational opportunity rather than simply cultural enrichment. By emphasizing equitable access for all students and positioning arts education as an essential component of a well-rounded education, advocates broadened public support well beyond traditional arts constituencies.

Finally, the implementation of Proposition 28 illustrates that advocacy does not end once legislation is adopted. Organizations such as Create CA developed practical tools that help communities understand funding requirements, identify gaps in local arts education, engage school district leadership, advocate for arts plans and Visual and Performing Arts (VAPA) coordinators, and ensure that new funding fulfills its intended purpose. Public education therefore continues after policy adoption through accountability, technical assistance, and community engagement.

For Colorado advocates, the broader lesson is clear: successful public engagement equips communities not only to win policy victories but also to steward those victories over time.

Rather than relying on periodic appropriations, the measure guarantees annual funding to supplement, rather than replace, existing arts education investments.



Strategies for Meaningful Public Engagement

Across the examples featured in this chapter, several common strategies consistently emerge. Although every community will adapt these approaches to its own context, they provide a useful framework for designing engagement efforts that build lasting public support.

Create Opportunities for Participation, Not Just Attendance

Residents become advocates when they actively participate in community life. Programs that invite people to create, exhibit, volunteer, perform, or contribute ideas foster a much stronger sense of ownership than events that simply attract audiences.

Meet People Where They Already Gather

Successful initiatives extend beyond traditional arts venues into schools, libraries, parks, downtown businesses, neighborhood gathering spaces, and civic institutions. Bringing arts experiences into familiar public settings makes participation more accessible while demonstrating that creativity belongs throughout the community.

Build Partnerships Across Sectors

Public engagement becomes more effective when schools, municipalities, businesses, nonprofit organizations, higher education institutions, tourism organizations, and neighborhood groups work toward shared outcomes. These partnerships expand both public reach and organizational capacity.

Design for Inclusion

Removing barriers to participation requires intentional planning. Bilingual communications, accessible venues, affordable programming, multiple communication channels, and partnerships with trusted community leaders all help ensure that engagement reflects the diversity of the community being served.

Make Engagement Continuous

The strongest advocacy organizations view engagement as an ongoing civic practice rather than a series of isolated events. Annual festivals, recurring public forums, candidate conversations, community listening sessions, and volunteer opportunities create traditions that gradually strengthen public ownership of local arts and culture.



Common Challenges

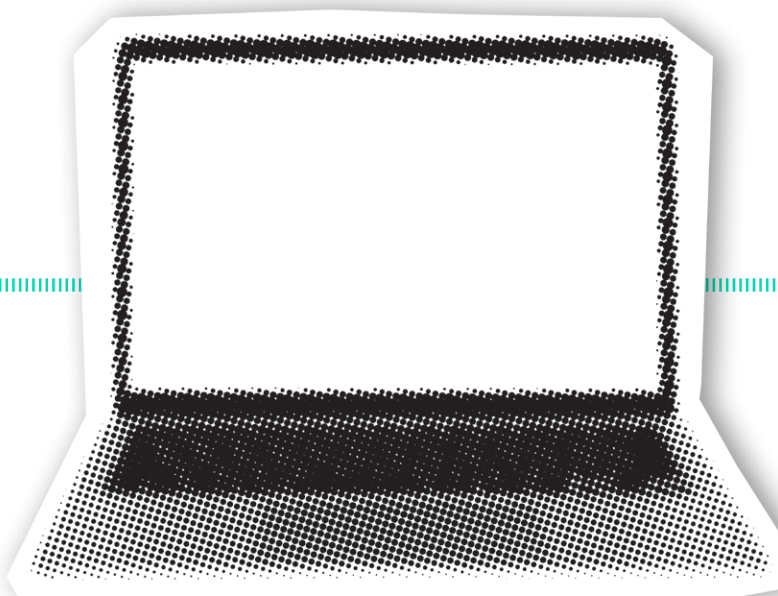
Communities pursuing public engagement initiatives frequently encounter similar obstacles. Recognizing these challenges early allows organizations to design more resilient strategies.

Participation is uneven. Some residents remain disconnected from traditional arts programming because of geography, language, transportation, cost, or familiarity. Successful organizations intentionally diversify locations, communications methods, and partnerships to reach broader audiences.

Engagement depends too heavily on a few individuals. Teachers, volunteers, or organizational leaders often shoulder disproportionate responsibility. Standardized communications materials, shared leadership structures, and cross-organizational partnerships help distribute workload while improving consistency.

Communications fail to reach everyone. Digital advertising alone rarely reaches the full community. Combining social media with schools, community organizations, local media, bilingual materials, and face-to-face outreach produces stronger participation.

Arts are perceived as serving only a limited audience. Communities can address this perception by emphasizing accessibility, affordability, youth participation, cultural diversity, and partnerships that demonstrate the relevance of arts and culture across many aspects of community life.



Resources Advocates Need



The following tools can help communities strengthen public engagement and education initiatives:

- * Candidate questionnaires and public forum guides.
- * School partnership agreements.
- * Bilingual communications templates.
- * Event marketing toolkits.
- * Survey instruments and community listening guides.
- * Arts education planning resources.
- * Ballot campaign materials and public education resources.
- * Communications plans and media outreach templates.
- * Community engagement plans.



Try This, Advocates!



Identify one recurring community event that already brings together residents from across your community—a farmers market, neighborhood festival, school celebration, holiday gathering, or downtown event. Rather than creating a new arts program, partner with event organizers to incorporate artists, student exhibitions, performances, or interactive creative activities into the existing event.

As residents experience arts and culture within familiar civic spaces, use the opportunity to invite conversation. Ask participants what they value about creativity in their community, what barriers they experience, and what they hope future generations will have access to.

These conversations do more than improve programming. They build relationships, surface new advocates, and create a shared understanding that arts and culture are not separate from community life—they are one of the ways communities learn, celebrate, connect, and imagine their future together.

