






# Arts education

## Retakes the Stage in California Schools



On a warm winter afternoon in Chula Vista near San Diego, the air buzzes with the sounds of violins and violas. In this quiet, working-class neighborhood near the Mexican border, a diverse group of students voluntarily stay after school to learn notes, practice pieces and develop harmony.



by Hugh Biggar

**A**t Karl H. Kellogg Elementary School, in the school's multipurpose room, an advanced group of student musicians rehearse a song for an upcoming community performance. A few parents — including a father in military fatigues perched on the room's small wooden stage — watch. In other Kellogg classrooms, students learn wind and string instruments. Their instructors are San Diego-area musicians taking part in the Community Opus Project, a partnership between the San Diego Youth Symphony and Conservatory and Chula Vista Elementary School District. Outside one classroom, two students stand in the sun. The older student helps a young violinist with his technique as part of the project's "each one, teach one" philosophy.

The ensemble of Kellogg Elementary student musicians, instructors and visiting parents represent a renewed interest in arts education in California, one linked to improved academic performance and a statewide push to scale up K-12 arts education in California after years of setbacks.

## Overture

Although required under the California Education Code, arts education has taken a seat at the back of the class as school districts increasingly focused on testing-driven curriculum tied to math and reading. Districts too have endured years of budget cuts both at the state and local levels. According to the California Department of Education, for instance, between 2000 and 2008, the number of state K-12 students taking music classes dropped 57 percent. Currently, the advocacy group California Alliance for Arts Education says just 11 percent of California's public schools are meeting state goals for arts education.

The shift away from arts education — categorized as theater, dance, music and visual arts — especially affects lower-income communities

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—Jesús Holguín, Immediate Past-president, CSBA

and schools with high numbers of African Americans, Latinos and English learners.

For example, a November 2015 review of one large school district found that many elementary and middle school children were not receiving adequate arts instruction — and schools in less affluent neighborhoods were the least likely to have suitable programs.

## Re-investing in the Arts

The decline of arts education in California is both a challenge and an opportunity for school communities to find partnerships that help increase arts education engagement.

For students, academic studies have found that arts education boosts creative, collaborative and critical thinking skills — cognitive abilities increasingly valued by colleges and universities and by employers. Arts, too, provides a way to apply those skills in a hands-on way and across subject areas in ways important to the deeper learning approach of Common Core.

"Truly having music at our schools has not only transformed how our students learn, but how our students view school," says Francisco Escobedo,

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Chula Vista ESD superintendent. “It has elevated the learning experience for all our kids.”

Adds Dalouge Smith, President & CEO of the San Diego Youth Symphony and Conservatory, Chula Vista ESD’s partner, “Like other academic subjects, music requires a compounding body of knowledge that builds over time. And it requires a level of commitment from students and teaches essentials like showing up on time, and learning to be responsible by bringing your instrument with you.”

As part of this appreciation for the academic gains from arts, many local education agencies and organizations use the acronym STEAM, rather than STEM, to refer to a cohort of skills considered key to students’ future success — science, technology, engineering, arts and math.

Says Jesús Holguín, immediate past president of CSBA and a board member in the Moreno Valley Unified School District near Riverside, “Arts education is the creative



connection to the future of our students and must be included in the regular school day curriculum.”

School districts such as Chula Vista ESD and Encinitas USD have also seen the arts improve community engagement with schools, and boost students’ desire to go to school.

## Scaling Up the Arts

At the state level, State Superintendent of Instruction Tom Torlakson has encouraged this thinking. In 2011, Torlakson partnered with organizations statewide to establish Create CA, a coalition to advocate for arts and its inclusion as a core academic subject. The coalition has since published a “Blueprint for Creative Education” (although arts instruction in each of the four disciplines is required under state code for grades 1-12, the code leaves implementation up to each district and has no minimum number of minutes).

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First Lady Michelle Obama, too, has taken up the cause with the program, Turnaround Arts. The initiative aims to develop more arts education in low-performing schools nationally. So far, 10 schools in California have taken part in Turnaround Arts, which focuses on providing supplies and high-profile guest instructors. In one example, the guest artist at Salinas area elementary school, Mary Chapa Literacy and Technology Academy is the drummer Chad Smith, from the rock band, Red Hot Chili Peppers.

Increasingly, more school districts in California are taking note, helped in part by the Local Control Funding Formula that allows districts to make decisions that best fit their needs.

“LCFF has broadened the markers of school success to include school climate, student engagement, parent involvement, a broad course of study...in addition to academic achievement,” says Sibyl O’Malley, spokeswoman for the California Alliance for Arts Education. The alliance highlights how arts education can positively impact each of these priority areas in a district’s Local Control and Accountability Plan.

O’Malley also points to temporary taxes under Proposition 30 and an improved economy as important factors in school districts re-investing in the arts in recent years. Title 1 funds — supplemental federal funding to local school districts to meet the needs of at-risk and low-income students — can also be used for arts instruction.

In the fall of 2015, for instance, Los Angeles USD allocated \$2.5 million to arts programs at 33 middle schools. The San Diego Unified School District has also partnered with the San Diego Youth Symphony while investing \$3 million of Title 1 funds over a two-year period to promote arts education. San Diego USD’s Title I arts integration initiative, “Learning

Through the Arts,” now reaches students in 22 elementary schools.

For school districts looking to fund and develop arts programs of their own, California Alliance for Art Education’s O’Malley suggests establishing a plan of action first.

“We find the best way for schools to build their arts program is start with an arts plan created with a diverse group, from teachers, students, parents and school and district administrator,” O’Malley says. “That plan should include best practices, staffing, professional development and partnerships allowing for systemic growth. When funding [becomes available] districts have a plan to move forward with support from all stakeholders.”

Holguín also encourages school board members to lead on the issue. “School Boards provide the vision and direction needed for



districts to prioritize arts education in the manner dictated by the local constituency,” he says, while adding that his district, the Moreno Valley USD, has more than 50 full-time arts instructors for K-12.

“We have embraced the continuous stream of research that points to an arts education as a key to student success,” Holguín says.

"We continue to grow our arts programs by investing more and increasing staff."

Meanwhile, other California school districts already facing steep teaching shortages are struggling to find qualified teachers in the visual and performing arts.

Some districts have overcome these issues by partnering with other organizations to help share some of the program costs. Chula Vista's elementary school program provides one such example of what can be achieved in a short amount of time in a district with limited means and a diverse population.

## Encore

One of California's largest K-6 districts, Chula Vista ESD is just south of San Diego on the border with Mexico. The district is home to nearly 30,000 students, and 35 percent are English learners, 68 percent are Latino and more than half receive a free or reduced-price school lunch.

Like many school districts, Chula Vista ESD was hit hard by the recession and reduced budgets and cut programs accordingly. Arts instruction had largely disappeared in the district until 2010.

In that year, the district partnered with the San Diego Youth Symphony and Conservatory and, with the help of Title 1 funds, introduced free after school instrumental instruction to 65 third-graders at two lower-income schools with a higher number of students learning English.

Based on a program from Venezuela called El Sistema, students at six Chula Vista ESD schools now meet twice each week for two hours of music instruction taught by local professional musicians. The classes, including

instrumental orchestra and band are open to any district student. Beginners learn as a group and gradually move up to more advanced levels. In addition to their school instruction, student musicians perform at community and school board events. Grants help provide instruments and funding.

The after-school Community Opus Project (now enrolling more than 300 students) began as a pilot program. Impressed by the results, including improved grades and attendance, district officials decided to include arts instruction during school, as well. That effort first began in Chula Vista ESD during the 2014-2015 academic year with eight full-time staff and many part-timers (some of whom did not have a credential to teach arts). This year the district now has nearly 70 full-time arts teachers, teaching more than 21,000 students in the core subjects of dance, theater, music and visual arts. Some schools offer media arts,

as well. At this time, Chula Vista ESD's Arts Coordinator Lauren Shelton says the smaller schools offer arts once to twice a week. Larger schools have arts once every other week.

"The community has full-time music education for the first time in 15 years," says Annette Fritzsche, Community Opus community programs manager. "We have seen more focused students, improved parent engagement and comfort with visiting schools and spending time there."

The Chula Vista ESD school board too has backed the effort with the help of flexibility allowed under the LCAP. In May 2015, the board allocated \$5 million annually over a three-year period to hire more visual and performing arts teachers. Given the problems finding qualified teachers, the district has also hired a recruiter to help them recruit nationally.

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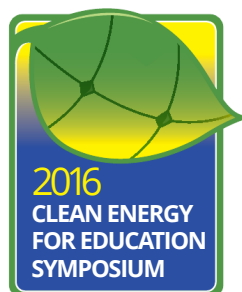
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In ways large and small, the Chula Vista Community Opus Project, too, continues to pay off.

"We get calls from all across the state asking about the program," says Fritzsche, who encourages superintendents and school board members to have a strategic plan and outline what needs to change in a district to allow for arts instruction.

More locally, the effort continues to be a hit.

"Before I had music, I was having trouble. I didn't see the point of doing homework or paying attention at school," says Bruno, a Community Opus student musician. "This program has changed my life a lot. You know that there is a place that you belong." **CS**

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## Resources

### A Blueprint for Creative Schools:

A report by Create CA, California's Statewide Arts Education Coalition  
<http://bit.ly/1ZpJRkl>

### Five Examples of District LCAPS in Arts Education

California Alliance for the Arts  
<http://bit.ly/1MI7QQ2>

### Title 1 Arts Policy to Practice

California State PTA  
<http://bit.ly/1XKSEwa>



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