



A new bill could increase access to arts education, but some fear it won't guarantee quality



Carla Javier | April 4, 2018

The California education code actually requires that all public school students have access to arts education, but in practice, not all kids get it.

Santa Monica-area state senator Ben Allen has proposed a creative solution: SB 933. Rather than enforcing the education code through policy, if passed, it would use money to incentivize districts to find ways to provide arts for their students.

The bill would take advantage of the state budget surplus to create a one-time grant program to help underserved schools and districts provide arts education to their students, and to support districts with strong existing commitments to arts instruction.

But when Allen, who also chairs the state Senate Education Committee, opened up the committee's hearing on Wednesday morning, he had to start with a clarification.

In the bill's analysis, the California Music Educators Association was listed among about 60 organizations that support the bill, but, according to the group's president Scott Hedgecock they've yet to make a call either way.

"We're watching," Hedgecock told KPCC ahead of the hearing. "We did not choose to support, nor did we choose to oppose."

The mistake points to a tension revealed by the bill: while many arts education advocates applaud the goal of SB 933, some professional educators are skeptical of the approach this program would take.

Hedgecock, who teaches choral music at Fullerton Union High School, said that his organization, which represents music teachers throughout the state, has some concerns about the bill's language around who would actually provide the arts instruction.

The way the bill is written, funds from the grant could be used on arts education provided by credentialed arts teachers and by "qualified community arts providers," meaning people like teaching artists, who bring the arts to classrooms, but who might not necessarily have training or credentials to teach.

"Arts education is provided by a credentialed teacher," Hedgecock said. "Anything less is not full arts education. It may be an arts experience."

But California Alliance for Arts Education executive director Joe Landon told KPCC ahead of the hearing that it's also important to consider how California students currently access the arts in schools.

"The existing system that includes private arts providers and includes arts integration, and the system depends on those different folks playing their roles in the system, which we believe support the work that credentialed art teachers do," Landon said.

Hedgecock also has concerns about the one-time nature of the grant.

"They're not going to have the capacity to continue it if it's just one time, one year funding," Hedgecock said.

Joe Landon said that his organization, which worked with Allen to sponsor the bill, looks at the funding issue differently.

"This is an opportunity – a unique opportunity at this moment – and this is the most effective way to get there," Landon explained. "If we could think of another way that had it sustain over time, we'd propose that."

Despite their different reactions to the approach, both Landon and Hedgecock's organizations have similar big picture goals: making arts education – and in Hedgecock's case, music instruction in particular – accessible to all California students.

"It's kind of hard to just see how it's really going to accomplish the goals," Hedgecock said. "We're just not sure that this vehicle is the way to go about it unless we can get some discussion to change the language."

Landon said he hears that concern.

"I guess the question is, do you take a first step, or do you just stand back and look at the water and say, 'well, not today,'" Landon said.

The education committee voted Wednesday to move the bill to the appropriations committee.