



On the Path to Title I

Posted by [Joe Landon](#), [Laura Smyth](#), Apr 13, 2016

In 2011, the [California Alliance for Arts Education](#) began its [Title I Initiative](#) as a way of clarifying misunderstandings about the appropriateness of using Title I funds to support arts strategies and a guide to action for schools and districts seeking to embark on the work. Four years in, we're delighted to see that the Initiative has taken root around the state, as well as resonating with some other states pursuing similar agendas, particularly in anticipation of the [Every Student Succeeds Act](#) (ESSA)'s devolution of much decision-making power to the state level.

In a nutshell, federal Title I policy clearly allows schools and districts to include arts education in their strategies to achieve Title I goals. Downstream of the federal level, however, the Alliance found that there was a lack of clarity about whether and how the arts could play a role in Title I. Coupled with the culture of "fear of reprisal" that seemed to permeate the Title I world—where funding could be retracted if a program didn't meet state or federal expectations—this lack of clarity was proving an insurmountable barrier. Schools and districts, it seemed, were either electing to ignore the opportunity to include arts education in their strategies for achieving Title I goals, or were moving forward in a way that would draw no attention to those practices.

The intent of the Alliance's Title I Initiative, therefore, was to develop and clarify a policy pathway—a shared understanding aligned across school, district, state, and federal levels of leadership regarding what is allowable when it comes to expending Title I funds on arts education. This pathway, when fully activated, could have the effect of breaking barriers to entry across the state for implementing proven, effective programming for some of the state's most under-resourced students.

Our process wasn't rocket science—we took it one step at a time, and we're still doing that. But we're excited to say we're starting to see some results in school districts actually doing the work, and in the conversation around Title I shifting from 'can we do it?' to "how do we do it?" Here's how we got started:

We did our homework. We talked to federal officials and state officials in Title I and got them to write letters clarifying the appropriateness of dedicating Title I funds to arts education. We met with regional leaders to give the message and understand what the barriers were to implementation and made it happen.

We created a resource. Using the Title I yearly planning cycle and the studies in [ArtsEdSearch](#) as a base, we created an online resource, [title1arts.org](#), to take users through the planning cycle, with

detailed information at every stage of the cycle—from a research matrix built around the four Title I goals to breaking down the Title I non-regulatory guidelines to samples of school site plans.

We spread the word. We presented at local advocacy meetings, state-level symposia, and national conferences, sharing information about the policy pathway and the new website. We identified the school district as the primary unit of change, and we started presenting with school districts like San Diego Unified who are taking the first bold steps to put the policy into practice. And we're now developing a pilot project with the [California County Superintendents Educational Services Association](#), also known as CCSESA, to work with their county arts leads to identify promising school districts and help train them up.

We documented stories of success. We were able to make [five short films](#) about the work in San Diego and Chula Vista that we published on the web site, and we make sure to take advantage of key opportunities to share the films and the ongoing work with federal, state, and local officials. We can't do the actual work of implementing programs, but we can carry the stories up the chain to remind policymakers that policies create opportunities for action, and action leads to good news.

We're sharing with other states. Title I is a federal program, not a state program, and from the beginning we've known we aren't the only ones interested in this work or capable of carrying it forward. We've tried to develop resources that can be easily used or adapted in other places.

In October, we launched an [Arizona-based version of the title1arts.org website](#), adapted to the specifics of Arizona state laws and policies. Arizona was actually far ahead of the game in understanding the relationship between Title I and the arts, through the leadership of Lynn Tuttle and others at the state department of education, but they hadn't been able to put the resources all in one place. Now the website is supported and maintained by [Arizona Citizens for the Arts](#), and made its debut at the state Title I conference. We're also beginning to work with a number of other states, and learning a lot as we go.

It's a dynamic time for states as we start to understand the implications of ESSA at every level of state education policy, including Title I, but we're excited to see what's next.



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Joe and Laura are members of Americans for the Arts. [Learn more](#) about membership.