

# Reclaiming Arts and Culture in Education: The Fundamental Importance of the Fine Arts

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August 2021

## Key Points

- Despite overwhelming support for arts education, an increasing share of children is growing up without any exposure to the arts.
- Empirical evidence demonstrates a causal effect associated with arts education on cognitive and noncognitive development for children, influencing their life outcomes well beyond their initial entry into the labor market.
- Investing in the arts generates a wide array of societal benefits, including the promotion of social capital, the decline in politicization, and the influence of culture.

In recent years, much of the education policy debate has become consumed by America’s “culture war.” State legislators and school boards across the country have questioned whether public schools ought to reinforce, or transform, America’s civic culture. Americans in many ways are sharply divided: In 2019, 95 percent of Republicans were extremely or very proud of the United States, compared with only 29 percent among Democrats and 67 percent among independents, according to Gallup.<sup>1</sup> However, amid this debate is an opportunity to launch a new culture war, one that could actually unite parents of different political viewpoints: a war for high culture in the classroom.

Over 90 percent of Americans believe arts are important for the education system, and 80 percent believe adults should continue to access arts education outside school, according to a 2019 Ipsos poll.<sup>2</sup>

That includes creative writing, music, the performing arts, and even digital art. Moreover, roughly 80 percent believe that arts education is just as important today as it was 10–15 years ago and that it will remain an important part of society 10 years from now.

However, only 49.5 percent of people received any arts education in childhood in 2008, compared with 64.6 percent in 1982, and that proportion continues to decline.<sup>3</sup> Even outside the education system, federal appropriations to state arts agencies fell by nearly half since 2000, according to the National Endowment of the Arts.<sup>4</sup> But we have better empirical evidence than ever before that the arts build character and civic cohesion. Instead of just playing defense in a civic culture war, conservative leaders should take the culture war offensive on behalf of arts education in public schools.

## The Empirical Case for the Arts

The rapid expansion of the digital economy has drastically increased the demand for technical skills, such as programming and network security, including non-technology sectors.<sup>5</sup> While these changes in industry composition have been important for productivity growth,<sup>6</sup> the push for technical skills, such as reading and math, has often come at the expense of more fundamental noncognitive skills that are even more essential for childhood development and long-run success.

The arts are one of the most effective ways to build noncognitive skills for at least three reasons.<sup>7</sup> First, they promote habits and discipline. For example, musical education has been linked with lasting improvements in both verbal and numerical literacy.<sup>8</sup> Musical education, particularly learning how to play an instrument, can improve fine and gross motor skills; coordinated rhythmic movement activities and synchronizing to a beat can produce large cognitive returns that extend beyond childhood.<sup>9</sup>

Second, the arts require socialization and interaction with others in teams and communities. Several high-profile and cross-country interventions have emerged. These include El Sistema, a musical training program that began in 1975 to provide free classical music training to thousands of school children from poor and moderate socioeconomic backgrounds, and the Diversion into Music Education, which began as a community cooperation between organizations in Cape Town, South Africa, and Tampa, Florida. Both programs have taught the importance of working in an ensemble, which inevitably develops social and communication skills.<sup>10</sup> One experiment, for example, found that children who engaged in music making experienced an increase in positive attitudes among one another and heightened cooperation, compared with those who practiced independently.<sup>11</sup> Even mere exposure to art and music through field trips has been linked with achievement effects.<sup>12</sup>

Third, the arts stimulate regions of the brain that are important for developing language and creative capabilities. For example, comparisons among observationally similar musicians and non-musicians demonstrate consistent differences in neural structure, including improved motor and auditory functions and lower risks of neurodegenerative diseases.<sup>13</sup> Many studies have found that

musical interventions, particularly those done in early childhood, lead to an increased ability to perceive changes in tonal setting and a more rapid maturation of auditory processing.<sup>14</sup>

## The Societal Benefits of the Arts

If the arts benefit individual people, then they may have multiplicative effects on society at large, particularly in producing social capital. One recent study, for example, found that the decline in arts employment between February and May 2020 was linked with lower social capital even after controlling for a wide array of socioeconomic differences, including income.<sup>15</sup> Given that social capital is intimately linked with intergenerational mobility and economic and social flourishing, promoting it is important, particularly in a post-pandemic economy.

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The arts are an important vehicle for promoting social capital because they convene people with heterogeneous socioeconomic and political backgrounds under common principles that are broadly recognized as beautiful and true. By bringing people together under a common banner, we grow in compassion and understanding, which are prerequisites for dialogue and the building blocks for flourishing at both individual and societal levels. This phenomenon is often referred to as collective memory—the recognition of shared norms, principles, and aspirations.<sup>16</sup>

Consider, for example, the life of Gustavo Dudamel, a musician and conductor from Venezuela. Born into poverty, he participated in the aforementioned El Sistema. While Dudamel has had an incredible career as a musician, he has also influenced

popular culture. In 2015, he conducted both the opening and end titles for the official motion picture soundtrack and film *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*. In 2016, he and the Youth Orchestra Los Angeles accompanied Coldplay and sang with Chris Martin, Beyoncé, and Bruno Mars in the Super Bowl. In 2018, he won the Dorothy and Lillian Gish Prize, which is given to “a man or woman who has made an outstanding contribution to the beauty of the world and to mankind’s enjoyment and understanding of life.”<sup>17</sup> In sum, Dudamel, who is only age 40, has profoundly affected not only the music sector but also popular culture and society at large, arguably based on the fundamental investments in the early childhood arts education intervention of El Sistema.

## Policy Recommendations

Conservative leaders at the state level have at least three tools to promote the arts.

First, governors should set aside part of the COVID-19 relief funding to sponsor arts competitions and provide grants to school districts that want to create or build out arts programming, especially for early childhood grades and high school.<sup>18</sup> Mayor Steven Fulop in Jersey City, New Jersey, provides one such template with the Arts and Culture Trust Fund, which provides sustainable support for artists and encourages community engagement to review and vote on submissions for funding.<sup>19</sup> Especially since the arts and culture sector was hit hard by the pandemic and so many students experienced a substantial decline in the quality of educational services because of school closures, redirecting

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some of the COVID-19 relief funding to the arts is a small and short-run step forward.

Second, states should offer vouchers that allow families to send their children to specialized arts lessons. Despite widespread support for arts education, it has become less prevalent over time; clearly, there is an impasse. By funding families, rather than schools, students will have more choice. Furthermore, one of the major limitations inherent in arts education is the lack of integration of practitioners. Given the oversupply of arts and music graduates in the labor market, vouchers would also provide an additional source of income for working artists and incentivize schools to better integrate them into their educational infrastructure in the first place.

Third, state leaders should not be shy about linking the arts to patriotic and virtuous themes that inspire children to strive toward higher ideals, particularly given the vast majority of public support. Certain pieces of art—ranging from paintings to operas—are incredible and widely revered for their quality across nations. If that were not the case, then memory of these works would fade, and there would be no appetite for them in the first place. However, intentional efforts to recognize our roots at local levels are required, particularly in education, to promote cultural durability.<sup>20</sup>

It is easy to take some of our most fundamental values and institutions for granted, but they require sustained and systematic investment. The arts not only inspire people to reach for the stars in a moment but also provide the values to sustain such inspiration. A society that forfeits arts education and a reverence for the arts forfeits the language needed for expressing meaning and emotion.

## Notes

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