



The Future of Community Arts Education

National Guild of Community Schools of the Arts, January 2010

In April 2010, the National Guild will formally adopt its new name, National Guild for Community Arts Education

Community Arts Education

Today, more than 5,000 nonprofit, arts organizations and government agencies are providing professionally-led, direct instruction in the arts to people of all ages, backgrounds and abilities in community settings. Many also are providing learning/development *through* the arts with a focus on positive aging, youth development, community building and other areas. Through partnerships with public schools, senior centers, public agencies and other organizations, they ensure the broadest possible access to arts education in our communities.

As the sole national service organization for community arts education providers since 1937, the National Guild of Community Schools of the Arts envisions a nation where all Americans have access to arts learning opportunities throughout their life-spans. Our dynamic network of more than 400 arts education organizations includes neighborhood music schools, arts centers, and arts education divisions of universities, theater and dance companies, museums, parks and recreation departments and others. The diversity and scope of this network has grown tremendously in the past three decades.¹ United by their common commitments to quality, accessibility and accountability in arts education, these organizations foster lifelong participation in the performing, visual and literary arts, and develop the artists (amateur and professional) and audiences of the future.

Envisioning a New Day for Arts Education in America

While the current economic crisis is an obvious challenge to the field, the National Guild believes we may be on the cusp of a dramatic, *positive* change. The Obama administration is taking a real interest in the arts and its role in communities. And the economy—while tough on many organizations—forces us to focus on our contribution to economic recovery and community vitality.

In order for change to occur, however, we, as an arts and cultural community, must help shape it. At first glance, our vision of a new day for arts education may seem irrational or overly optimistic. Americans for the Arts' newly released National Art Index shows contributed support for the nonprofit arts sector on the decline even before the recession. And there is speculation that this decline may be a long-term trend.² Challenges to the non-profit arts sector have been compounded by the current downturn, but we believe there are related opportunities for organizations engaged in innovative and ambitious new ways of thinking and doing business.

Increasing lifelong learning opportunities in the arts requires that we 1) animate and foster Americans' desire to get involved with activities that provide them with a sense of personal

¹ In the past three decades, the number of Guild member institutions has grown from 63 to 408 and the number of states in which these organizations are located has increased from 16 to 45. More than half of these organizations offer instruction in more than one artistic discipline.

² Kushner, Roland J. and Randy Cohen. National Arts Index 2009: An Annual Measure of the Vitality of Arts and Culture in the United States. *Americans for the Arts*. 2010. 25 Jan. 2010.

<http://www.americansforthearts.org/pdf/information_services/art_index/NAI_full_report_optimized.pdf>

fulfillment and community connection; 2) identify and act upon our common ground within the arts sector to leverage shared resources, exchange models of best practice and identify new areas for creativity and growth; and 3) collaborate and build sustainable partnerships broadly across sectors that position us to participate in a more comprehensive approach to community revitalization.

Opportunities for sustainability and growth include:

1. America's Potential "Cultural Reset": A Growing Interest in Doing vs. Consuming

The Reinvestment Fund President Jeremy Nowak recently observed that, in response to the recent financial fallout, Americans are taking a new interest in activities that matter, in making or doing things versus consuming them, and on regaining the skills to produce and distribute high quality goods and services.³ Similarly, a recent article in *The New York Times* reported that Americans are beginning to prioritize experiences over material spending.⁴ Citing the Department of Labor's time-use surveys, the article noted that compared with 2005, Americans in 2008 were getting by with less and spending more time taking part in organizational, civic and religious activities. John Zogby's longitudinal research on the transformation of the American Dream also indicates that, over the past 15 years, there has been a broad movement toward simplification among Americans who have achieved some measure of financial success and are now looking to get out of the 'rat race' and find meaning and fulfillment in new ways. Similarly those who are retiring or have retired in recent years increasingly want to be engaged in activities that enrich their quality of life.⁵

Aligned with this potential cultural reset is Americans' growing interest in art making, especially by amateurs. The National Arts Index shows a slight growth in personal engagement in creative activities over the past several years.⁶ And a new study from the Kaiser Family Foundation reports that the amount of time children and youth, ages 8-18, spend with electronic media has risen dramatically.⁷ Not all of this time is spent creatively, of course, but popular online activities [such as social networking, podcasting, writing blogs and video sharing] are contributing to the rise.

We can also see this trend towards personal engagement in art-making reflected in popular culture with reality shows such as *American Idol*, *America's Got Talent*, *So You Think You Can Dance (SYTYCD)*, *Making the Band*, and *Project Runway* that fascinate and earn high ratings. Whatever one might think of the artistic merit of these shows, and remembering that ultimately art is not primarily about competition, one can not underestimate the impact the widespread popularity of these shows might have on arts education. That so many audition for these shows and that the audiences are in the millions speaks volumes; moreover, viewers, especially youth, begin to see themselves not only as audience, but as potential art-makers. We have a timely opportunity to work with the creators of these programs to raise awareness of the value of arts education and broaden access to arts learning opportunities. Canada's National Ballet School has partnered with SYTYCD Canada, for example, to create a national web-directory of dance education providers called, "Want to Dance" (www.wanttodance.ca). The site features information on dance education, a blog and a "show off" gallery in addition to its easy-to-use search tool. SYTYCD Canada in turn promotes the directory on their website making it easier for people to participate in dance education by finding the style, level

³ "A New Day for Arts Education in America." GuildNotes Winter 2010: 10-11. National Guild of Community Schools of the Arts

⁴ Cave, Damien. "In Recession, Americans Doing More, Buying Less." *The New York Times*. 2 January 2010. <<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/01/03/business/economy/03experience.html?scp=25&sq=experience&st=cse>>

⁵ Zogby, John. The Way We'll Be: The Zogby Report on the Transformation of the American Dream. New York: Random House, 2008.

⁶ Kushner, Roland J. and Randy Cohen. National Arts Index 2009: An Annual Measure of the Vitality of Arts and Culture in the United States. Americans for the Arts. 2010. 25 Jan. 2010.

<http://www.americansforthearts.org/pdf/information_services/art_index/NAI_full_report_optimized.pdf>

⁷ Ridout, Victoria J, Uller G. Foehner, and Donald F. Roberts. "Generation M2: Media in the Lives of 8- to 18-Year-Olds." Kaiser Family Foundation. Jan. 2010. <<http://www.kff.org/entmedia/upload/8010.pdf>>

and studio that is right for them.

Even with these interests in personal art-making, we cannot assume that people's growing interest in doing things will lead naturally to greater participation in the arts. Recognizing that many Americans have greater demands on their time and resources, we must work to cultivate demand for arts education, as well as respond to the interests and needs of our communities through the types of programs we provide and the ways in which we provide them. Engagement strategies—that promote consistent community interaction—can help organizations determine what is needed to make their programs more relevant, attractive and useful to potential students and participants. These strategies include asking communities what they think about the arts and what they want and need; gathering information about existing programs, activities and cultural resources; engaging parents and families as advocates for arts learning; ensuring that programs are accessible and inviting; and adopting new relationships to place that foster participation in the arts in online “virtual” spaces, community and senior centers, and parks and other outdoor areas for example. These community engagement strategies will not only help community arts education providers attract and recruit new students, but also help them innovate by tapping into what Maribel Alvarez calls: “the local, creative authentic genius of ordinary citizens.”⁸

2. Collaborations within the Arts Sector

One significant challenge to a new day for arts education in America is the existence of internal barriers within the arts sector that divide us along the lines of professional/non-professional, high/low, nonprofit/for-profit and by artistic discipline. These divisions have contributed to what Eric Booth calls “a culture of scarcity” which he suggests is eroding “the expansive, inclusive impulses” that got us into the arts in the first place.⁹

There is evidence, however, that some of these silos that have traditionally separated the arts from one another are breaking down. June 2009 marked the one year anniversary of the National Performing Arts Convention (NPAC) in Denver. It was an unprecedented gathering of more than 3,000 arts professionals from every discipline who came together to set the agenda for the future of arts in America. NPAC offered an important opportunity for issues that cross boundaries—such as education, the impact of new technologies, leadership development, artist training, and sustainability—to be discussed and prioritized.¹⁰

In the past several decades, the National Guild's own membership has seen a significant growth of multidisciplinary arts programs and unprecedented levels of change with the founding of new organizations and the evolution of new models such as arts centers and arts education divisions of colleges and universities, social service agencies, parks and recreation departments, youth-based organizations and others. Our network also encompasses for-profit organizations, individual entrepreneurs and arts-in-education programs. Through the Guild, these diverse organizations are coming together as a learning community to share innovative ideas, effective practices and program models, and to advocate for increased support.

And in at least a half a dozen cities and regions, community-based, system-wide efforts are underway to sustain high quality arts learning experiences and ensure that all segments within the “arts learning population” (young children, older adults, ESL students, etc.) are adequately served. In Dallas, Big Thought, a National Guild member, is spearheading a city-wide partnership that includes city

⁸ Maribel Alvarez quoted in Josephine Ramirez's keynote address, “Art Making and the Purpose of the Economy,” at the 2008 Conference for Community Arts Education, Philadelphia, PA.

⁹ Booth, Eric. “Finding the Smallest Unifying Particle in the Human Universe: An Artistic Theory of Everything.” *Chamber Music Magazine* May/June 2009. Chamber Music America.

¹⁰ As a result of the convention, three priority areas were identified for collective follow-up action. They were advocacy, diversity and, yes, arts education.

government, the school district and more than 60 arts, cultural and community-based organizations. The Thriving Minds initiative is committed to developing successful children, strong families and vibrant communities through creative learning and arts and cultural experiences. Over the past four years more than \$50 million has been raised from a broad range of public and private stakeholders for these efforts which currently serve more 160,000 people every day.

By continuing to collectively identify and act upon our points of intersection, we, as a sector, can move closer to ensuring arts and arts education for every American, as well as increase engagement, expand our organizational capacity, spark innovation and more boldly demonstrate the positive impact of our work.

3. Comprehensive Community Planning

Similarly, we also have an opportunity to see arts education as a resource within a much more comprehensive community building process. “We are experiencing a revival of comprehensive approaches to community revitalization,” said Maria Rosario Jackson, senior research associate at The Urban Institute, “There’s now an opportunity to assert arts and culture as a fundamental piece of what a comprehensive approach would look like.”¹¹

The antecedents of the community arts education movement in the United States emerged in the late nineteenth century as arts programs provided by urban settlement houses and neighborhood centers. These organizations were educational, social and political centers that enrolled, served, employed and advocated for community members and contributed to community health. For a paradigmatic change in community arts education to occur, we must build on these historical roots and think about the benefits of arts participation more expansively. The arts can positively contribute to youth development, workforce development, identity formation, place-making, healthcare, the sciences and other areas. “Who wants to invest in communities that don’t have the promise of these kinds of attributes?” remarked Rosario Jackson.

“As arts organizations, we have an opportunity to think differently about how we can be a resource within much larger community-cultural building processes that are already taking place,” notes Julie Simpson, Executive Director of Urban Gateways in Chicago (a National Guild member). To help facilitate these alliances, we need to document clear and specific connections between our field and these other sectors in terms of our shared values, commitments and goals, as well as articulate the areas where we don’t overlap and how these areas make the contributions of arts education to community planning unique. And more importantly, we have to *listen*, says Simpson: “It’s not about pitching your program. You have to initiate relationships and ask to join community meetings and listen. Then you can engage in a conversation about what you do.”¹²

¹¹ “A New Day for Arts Education in America.” GuildNotes Winter 2010: 10-11. National Guild of Community Schools of the Arts

¹² “A New Day for Arts Education in America.” GuildNotes Winter 2010: 10-11. National Guild of Community Schools of the Arts