

# Parents for the Arts Advisory

Outreach that Resonates and Motivates

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Douglas Gould and Company commissioned research on behalf of the Ford Foundation to propel advocacy for arts in schools and arts integration. We wanted to determine what moves arts-oriented parents to act.

What we know is that parents for the arts are definitely on to something when it comes to opening doors for their children. This research builds upon the prevailing national belief that the arts are vital to a well-rounded education. Arts education has reaped serious buy-in of late, was deemed by Congress for the first time in 2001 to be a part of core K-12 education curriculum, and has verbal support from every state in the Union but one. Despite that, a 2008 Center on Education Policy study indicates that there's been a 35% decline in the time devoted to art and music instruction in a significant number of public schools since 2002 due to the NCLB-driven focus on standardized-test scores. There are also indications that 41 districts or about 12% of all districts in the nation fail to offer arts instruction at all.

In all of our sleuthing, what we've discovered is that advocates better make some noise. Advocacy is the key to building the funding support, accountability measures, and long-term commitment required for school districts to honor, sustain and grow the commitments that so many officials are so quick to cite.

How to put pep in the step of arts advocates who feel like they're dancing as fast as they can? Over the past few years, an online community for like-minded advocates has emerged via [www.KeepArtsInSchools.org](http://www.KeepArtsInSchools.org), a Web site funded by the Ford Foundation and rich in research, messaging, and advocacy resources. Following is a primer that builds upon those resources, offers more refined guidance for how to talk to and mobilize parents to take action on behalf of learning in and through the arts in our nation's public schools.

Now in early 2009, a significant question becomes how to stay the course given the financial straits that our states and school districts currently face. Advocates need tools to help them hold the line. It is critical that advocates underscore arts education as core curricula and for its essential role in teaching and learning across all subjects. It's more important than ever to maintain learning in and through the arts to develop the "whole child" and foster the creativity and imagination so crucial in problem solving, innovation, and 21<sup>st</sup> century skills development. As the economy continues to occupy center stage in global news, it's imperative that parents get the message that the arts are vital for preparing young people to succeed in the work place and enjoy themselves along the way.

To provide a roadmap, Douglas Gould and Company developed the following arts advocacy guide based on

recent research that examined the persona of parents who advocate or are likely to advocate for arts in education. It offers messaging that you can use to motivate parents to act on behalf of stronger arts in schools and engage local communities to embrace arts education. One note at the outset – the term that we will use throughout this piece is "Parents for the Arts," which is the term or label that surveyed arts-active parents preferred.

As a nation we recognize the value of the arts by varying degrees. Ever since the U.S. Department of Education's "A Nation at Risk" report more than 25 years ago, we have scrutinized our education system and its output. More recently, in 2002, the No Child Left Behind Act even defined the arts as one of 10 core academic subjects, on equal footing with math, science and reading. The problem here is not one of vision



but of access and accountability. Often policymakers fail to offer the funding and follow through required to make learning in and through the arts a reality – they see only in dual colors, the red and black of the bottom line. At the same time, we know that the highest quality schools offer arts-infused learning as well as the basics of English, math and science. And, we know that these days they're seeing more red.

## Who Should Use This Advisory

- Anyone who is committed to learning in and through the arts
- Those who want to organize parents in their communities to protect the arts from budget cuts or diminishing learning time
- Arts education advocates who want to enable and empower more parents
- School boards and district officials who would like to understand more about the value of arts education to their communities
- Arts and cultural organizations that provide educational programming
- Arts education funders

## Research Background

During the past four years, Douglas Gould and Company spearheaded and oversaw quantitative research funded by the Ford Foundation on parent views and motivations when it comes to integrated arts education. Initial focus groups and a national survey conducted by Belden, Russenello and Stewart in 2005 led to a set of messaging and advocacy recommendations, all available at [www.KeepPartsInSchools.org](http://www.KeepPartsInSchools.org).

Later in 2006, the FDR Group conducted additional six focus groups in cities throughout the U.S. These investigations uncovered more information about arts-involved parents, vetted their beliefs regarding the arts in schools, defined the characteristics or “persona” of those parents and determined their willingness to advocate for better, more arts-engaging

schools. Early in 2008 research conducted by Lake Research Partners linked public support for fostering imagination and innovation in education to arts education, and unearthed an important finding – as voters these parents would support candidates who advocated arts education. FDR provided additional research in late 2008 with

an online survey of 500 arts-focused parents from across the country, as well as 619 other parents who could potentially become arts-active parents in the future.



The online survey revealed an influential subgroup of the overall parent population. Respondents who were most predisposed to advocating for arts in education met three criteria:

- They are parents of children in grades 1 through 12 living at home.
- They believe that integrating the arts throughout the learning process is an “extremely high” or “high” priority.
- They engage their children in family arts activities and have participated in at least three of 10 arts-related activities during the past two years.

*NOTE: While the online survey approach is effective for message testing and targeting small sub-groups of the population such as Arts Parents, its results are not based on a random sample and its findings cannot be generalized to reflect the national population of parents or Arts Parents specifically. It is instructive particularly for targeting highly supportive parents for engagement and advocacy but not scientifically sound as a national sample.*

## Target Audience

**W**hy target your message? Primarily because you get people’s attention when you speak directly to them with messages that resonate and provide clear imagery for framing a discussion. Additionally, messages supported by compelling proof points can start as a whisper but become a roar over time.

Parents for the Arts defines a distinct subgroup of the population who tend to be middle class, responsive to positive messages on the arts and can be effectively mobilized. You know these people. If you’re reading this, you may even be one of them. Our survey found that three out of 10 respondents have had conversations with their school administration about arts curricula and learning. These parents have the potential to form a powerful voting block – 89% of those surveyed are very or somewhat likely to vote for a candidate committed to arts education. Research revealed that these parents are most engaged and supportive when their child/children are in elementary schools, with interest dropping off as children progress in school.

These parents have a strong commitment to arts learning, are more driven by the fun of arts engagement than by practical messages about its impact on test scores, seek to pass on their love of the arts, believe that creativity and imagination are not the exclusive domain of arts classes, and show a willingness to take action on these issues. Sound like someone you know? When it comes to advocating for arts in education, these parents represent the “low-hanging fruit” and just need to know how they should direct their passion. We’re talking about empowered and empowering people here.

## Parents for the Arts Demographics

- 57% have household incomes of \$75K or more.
- 58% have at least a four-year college degree.
- 88% are white.
- Average age is 41.5 years old.
- 95% registered to vote.
- Bi-partisan: 34% are Republican, 31% are Democratic.
- 53% are mothers.
- 84% are parents of children who attend public high school.

## Key Messages and Talking Points

Developing strong messages and talking points and effectively communicating them is a crucial step for motivating Parents for the Arts to become strong advocates on behalf of arts education. Messages should touch on a variety of areas, including the fun of engagement, critical thinking skills and the development of the whole child while not ignoring such pressing issues as problem-solving skills. To strengthen the logic of your organization's messages, they should be bolstered by supporting facts or evidence – proof points that drive home your messages. Be mindful that, just as there are messages to advance, there are also those you should avoid. (See table on page 4).

## Parents for the Arts Attitudinal Characteristics

- 56% identify themselves as lovers of the arts.
- 40% say arts were an important part of family life "during my own childhood."
- 55% expose their children to the arts because "it will be good for their future."
- Arts parents are three times as likely to think that imagination and creativity can be developed through subjects such as history, science, and literature as opposed to only through the arts.

Following you will find three sample messages with supporting facts, derived from our research as well as talking points and guidance about advancing arts advocacy.

### Message #1: Arts education develops the whole child and is integral to the well-rounded quality education that every child needs.

- Seventy-one percent of arts parents firmly believe that participating in the arts helps students to become more well-rounded.
- The majority of these parents (68%) say that participating in the arts nurtures the development of the whole child.

### Message #2: Good arts curriculum and a commitment to creative learning are essential for a high-quality school.

- Seventy percent of Parents for the Arts say that learning in the arts is "absolutely essential" if their children are to get a high quality education.
- Parents for the Arts say it is an "extremely high priority" or "high priority" for the school "to integrate the arts throughout the learning process – that is, having separate classes in art and music in addition to having the arts (music, dance, drawing, poetry, and other expressions of creativity) as part of the learning experience in all subjects."
- Compared to other parents of children in grades 1-12, almost twice as many Arts Parents are extremely satisfied with their child's school when it comes to making sure students learn the arts and are encouraged to be creative and imaginative.

### Message #3: Even in tough economic times, school districts must sustain arts education to ensure children get the skills they need for a successful future.

- A majority of Parents for the Arts (60%) believe exposure to the arts improves learning.
- Sixty-one percent of these parents strongly believe that integrating the arts throughout the learning process "is so important for children, we just can't afford to lose it in the schools."

## Community Engaging Strategies

Parents for the Arts support the idea of arts in schools, and three in 10 have “contacted their child’s school directly to discuss some aspect of arts education” – to ask a question, offer a compliment, or lodge a complaint. However, they have most likely acted alone and not on an ongoing basis. This is not a static group. Our research tells us that these parents have the potential to be a powerful voting bloc and political base. Strength comes in numbers, therefore it is important to organize these parents and provide ongoing advocacy activities that harness their strength and give them presence in the community as well empower them to bring others into the effort. Many have led the call. Following are a few ideas to help you identify and connect with this group. Before reaching out to new stakeholder groups, however, there are a few things to consider:

- First organize and rally those who are already in your corner
- Chances are they have affiliations with your other stakeholder groups
  - use them as influential messengers

### School Arts Activities:

Address parents at school arts activities – give them an update about activities using the message points above and invite them to volunteer, attend events and participate in activities. Create sign-up sheets and facilitate sign-ups with email and additional contact information that can be set up in a database and used to communicate with these parents on a frequent basis.

**School Parent Groups (PTA):** Work through established PTA and parent activities to identify and reach out to others. Take advantage of the Q&As at PTA meetings to offer information about the arts and identify other parents who are interested in arts learning and concerned about supporting it. Submit ideas for speakers, topics and arts-related issues to your PTA program chairperson.

For example, check out the California State PTA (CAPTA) Smarts initiative for ideas about how you can engage parents in your community. The initiative is designed to create advocates for quality arts education throughout all California schools. Visit [www.capta.org/sections/programs-smarts/index.cfm](http://www.capta.org/sections/programs-smarts/index.cfm) for more information.

**School Board Meetings, etc.:** Enlist Parents for the Arts to consistently speak out at school board meetings and read their concerns into the public record. Don’t wait to make noise until arts are on the chopping block, Use the messages included in this document to create questions and then solicit audience members who are interested in joining your efforts. Ask for time on the agenda to discuss how your school is meeting state guidelines or standards for arts learning.

Issues to Advance	Arguments to Avoid
Arts develop whole child	Arts develop isolated skills
Arts are core; essential to provide a well-rounded education	Arts are specialty activities to enhance other basic subjects
Foster imagination, creativity for future success	Increases retention rates and test scores
Important enough to fight for	Low on totem pole of concerns
Great schools have great arts	Great schools drill the 3 R's
Arts are essential	Arts are a luxury
Parents are committed, want a voice and a vote	Parents uncommitted; concerned with other pressing issues
Non partisan issue	Partisan
Good for all kids	Good for my kid
Schools need arts for high quality education	Schools are failing our kids
Love of arts; want fun for their kids and themselves	Want arts as competitive edge for children to get ahead

**Seek Out Like-Minded Parents:** Ask your child’s art teacher, principal, teacher or your friends about other parents who have expressed an interest in arts learning. Then don’t be shy – reach out. It’s amazing how many advocacy groups have been formed by two moms or dads over a cup of coffee. All you need to start the dialogue is two people willing to share ideas and aspirations for their children’s education. Soon you’ll have the beginnings of a local movement.



**Family Events:** Many schools offer special family activities that take place after school or on weekends such as Science Nights or Game Nights. Suggest an Arts Learning Night offering hands-on activities that parents and kids can engage in to reinforce fun in learning and how arts are integrated across the entire curricula. Post signs for parent volunteers and tap the expertise of teachers to help suggest activities. At the event, gather names and addresses for your database and create a fact sheet that parents can take home to learn more about arts learning and why it is crucial to their child's education. Often it's the experience that makes the advocate.

**Spread Out into the Community:** Join a local arts organization. Check local calendar listings for performances, cultural celebrations, book readings and arts-related activities for kids. Also track adult and family activities at houses of worship, performing arts groups, community arts groups, and local bookstores where you may find like-minded parents. Strike up conversations at such events. You'll be surprised at how much you can learn about the state of arts education in your community.

**"Each One Reach One":** Ask questions about what's being done at local public and private schools, issues at lower-performing schools, which individuals and community organizations actively support the arts, and how you can tap into these networks to mobilize others into action. Consider partnering with parents at an underserved school in your area and encourage them to strengthen their arts advocacy program. This concept can be pitched to underperforming schools as a strategy for rallying and engaging parents to get more involved in their children's schools.

**Blogs:** Blogs can educate, provide resources to constituents and garner media attention. Approximately 27% of Internet users (32 million U.S. adults) read blogs regularly. As a public education and outreach tool, blogs effectively and expediently promote issues. Search out family and parent blogs – our research tells us that many parent blogs discuss the arts and education, including blogs by parents who

home-school their children, traditional moms, modern moms, arts educators and practitioners, conservatives and liberals alike. Post comments. It's important to develop relationships with bloggers. Additionally, consider setting up a blog that focuses on arts in schools in your community. Include a fact sheet about the programs in your district. Comment and update everyone on arts and school issues such as budgets and supportive administrators. Offer tips to get parents and children involved in arts activities, a schedule for arts-related events in your schools, and ways for parents to ask questions, connect and advocate for arts. You can also download information from [www.keepartsinschools.org](http://www.keepartsinschools.org), including advocacy tool kits, interviews, etc.



**School Web Site:** Ask the school to set up a page for Parents for the Arts, and develop opportunities to highlight the arts. Interview teachers of all subjects who use arts to communicate and engage students, develop a photo gallery and offer links to newspaper articles that discuss the value of arts learning. Record a brief video of arts learning opportunities (Flip video cameras are less than \$150) or audio clips for podcasts and add them to the school's Web site.

**Local Newspaper:** Tap weekly newspapers that cover town and school events. They're often widely read and always looking for content. Offer to cover stories about arts learning at your schools. Submit an opinion piece or letters to the editor and respond to articles about the arts. Have a parent or student with a talent for photography send images to news outlets for free use – with a photo credit!

You also can submit photos of students and teachers engaged in arts learning. You can create a fill-in press release that can be tailored to highlight a different activity or person involved in arts learning every month; and submit it to your local newspaper. Once organized, seek out potential parents as "citizen journalists" and ask your local organization to provide weekly or monthly space to cover the arts.

## **A Properly Framed Message + Facts + Compelling Stories + Repetition = Success:**

Be sure that throughout your advocacy program you stick to the message points provided, find compelling and localized stories to support your argument, and spread the word as frequently as possible. By getting the word out, sustaining the conversation, and making it real by offering the stories that touch people and illustrate the facts, you will be able to build your group of Parents for the Arts and move them to advocacy. Again, the Web site [www.Keepartsinschools.org](http://www.Keepartsinschools.org) offers many downloadable tools that can be offered to help educate and train other Parents for the Arts to speak up and recruit other parents to become involved.

## **Learn and Lead: Case Statement for Parents for the Arts**

**F**ollowing is a sample of how cogent messages can be incorporated into a single case statement for advocates to use.

All parents want the best for their children, and that's why so many consider themselves Parents for the Arts. Arts education develops the whole child and is integral to the well-rounded quality education that every child needs. Nationwide we've seen that the best schools know that learning in and through the arts develop well-rounded and inspired students. In fact, good arts curriculum and a commitment to creative learning are essential for a high-quality school.

Parents and teachers see the excitement on children's faces when the classroom awakens their creativity and imagination. We're talking about education that incorporates the various ways that children learn and that offers teachers tools to reach every kind of learner. This kind of engagement is serious "fun" – where students are challenged to problem-solve and think critically, and their work demonstrates their understanding while bringing beauty and meaning to school and to life.

Even in tough economic times, school districts must sustain arts education to ensure children get the skills they need for a successful future. As we face unprecedented financial setbacks in this country, we mustn't lose sight of arts education. Solutions to today's challenges will require more imagination and creativity – key by-products of the arts. Understand now more than ever that we must keep the arts programs that exist and grow them where they don't.

As an advocate, don't assume the role of victim – that in this crisis, the arts are inevitably on the chopping block and the first to get cut. Now is the time to hold on and fight for more! We can do this. It's a new day in American political and civic life and we have the power to create a movement that supports our children in becoming fully realized in and through the arts.

As a Parent for the Arts, remind policymakers, school officials and parents alike that what's good for the most privileged children in our society is good for all children. What we need is arts for all, arts for now, arts for a brilliant future.



## **Conclusion**

**P**arents can play a strong advocacy role within their schools and school districts and the research proves it. When it comes to advocating for arts curriculum and commitment to the arts within schools, there's no stronger organizing base than a proactive parents group. Parents for the Arts can suggest curricula; volunteer to spearhead programs that engage students and their families; and advance arts beyond school and throughout their communities. Our hope is that this information proves useful for ensuring that the value of the arts continues to be leveraged to influence positive outcomes for arts education and by extension for all children.

Keep arts in schools  
.org