

# Learning in 3D: Arts and Cultural Programming in Afterschool

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## Why Arts & Culture In Afterschool Are Important

Arts and cultural after-school programming provides children and youth with an opportunity for expression and inquiry. Participation in the arts: stimulates imagination and creativity; celebrates individuality while building self-esteem; reinforces academic principles and skills; increases problem-solving skills and techniques; encourages a sense of joy, which leads to engagement in learning; and prepares young adults for entering the workforce and increases their chances to compete better in a global economy.

Massachusetts is fortunate to have a wealth of arts and culture after-school program offerings. Support for these programs has the potential to increase the reach of arts programs and, in turn, positively impact learning and youth development.

Research has shown substantial evidence linking participation in arts and cultural education to academic achievement and positive development especially among low-income students (Catterall 1997; Darby 1994).

For example:

- Lower income students who are highly involved in arts narrow the academic achievement gap with higher income students.
- High arts involved, low-income students close the drop out gap with high-income, less arts-involved students. (Fiske, 1999).
- Nearly 40% of low-income, high arts-involved students scored in the top 50% in math and language but
- Less than 24 % of their low arts-involved peers scored in the top 50% on the same standardized test (Fiske, 1999).

Young people who participate in the arts for at least three hours on three days each week for at least one full year are: four times more likely to be recognized for academic achievement; three times more likely to win an award for school attendance; and four times more likely to win an award for writing an essay or a poem (Heath, 1998).

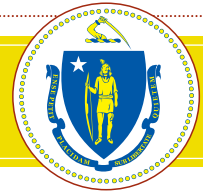
Students involved in after-school activities at arts organizations also have shown greater use of complex language than their peers in activities through community-service or sports organizations as indicated by Fiske's research below.

“Generalized patterns emerged among youth participating in after-school arts groups: a five-fold increase in use of if-then statements, scenario building followed by what-if questions, and how-about prompts, more than a two-fold increase in use of mental state verbs (consider, understand, etc.), a doubling in the number of modal verbs (could, might, etc.)” (Fiske, 1999)

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Finally, youth participating in arts after school programs develop skills that are important for workers in the new “economy of ideas.” Research links arts education with economic realities, asserting that “young people who learn the rigors of planning and production in the arts will be valuable employees in the idea-driven workplace of the future.” The Secretary’s Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS) was established by the Secretary of Labor in 1990 with the goal of encouraging a high-performance economy characterized by high-skill, high-wage employment. It identified critical skills that employees need in order to succeed in the workforce and in their life. In addition to literacy and computation skill, the commission stated that workers need the ability to work on teams, solve complex problems in systems and understand and use technology. These are many of the same skills youth gain through their participation in arts after school programs.

**Best Practices**

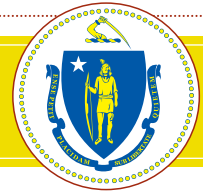
Research about best practices in the area of arts and cultural education draws both on broader understandings of youth development and of quality programming. This research highlights a number of particular characteristics of successful programs. These programs:

- Recognize that art is a vehicle that can be used to engage children and youth in activities that will increase their self-esteem;
- Make the delivery of the program a collaborative effort among the artist, social service provider, teacher, agency staff, children, youth, and family;
- Recognize and involve the community in which the youth live;
- Provide a safe haven for children and youth;
- Use age-appropriate curriculum that is essential in developing appropriate activities;
- Emphasize dynamic teaching tactics such as hands-on learning, apprentice relationships, and the use of technology;
- Culminate in a public performance or exhibition in an effort to build participants’ self-esteem through public recognition;
- Have high standards and opportunities to succeed;
- Offer sustained engagement, and
- Provide opportunities for active and reflective learning.

Art-based after school programs especially for teens can help to engage young people with their future and help them re-engage with their schools, despite the challenging education environments many of them face.

In this context, the importance of arts and cultural after-school opportunities becomes clear, as does the requirement of expertise in both arts content and youth development to effectively implement high-impact arts and cultural learning experiences.

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## **The State of Arts and Cultural Afterschool Programming in Massachusetts**

Hundreds of organizations across the state provide arts and cultural afterschool programming to children ages 5-18. These programs take place in a range of institutions from larger, multi-service organizations, such as Boys & Girls Clubs and YMCAs, to specialized arts organizations such as community music centers and local museums. While an array of programs exist, the statewide landscape presents critical challenges and opportunities to reach the full potential of arts and cultural opportunities in Massachusetts. These challenges and opportunities include:

**A lack of understanding of the importance of arts in after school programming.** It is not widely understood that after school art programs reinforces and unleashes the potential in youth. As a result, greater attention is given to programs that focus directly on academic achievement and improving test scores, while arts programs are overlooked and under appreciated by a number of key constituency groups including parents and funders.

**Inadequate funding, both public and private, to support arts-based after school programs.** At the state level the ongoing challenge of insufficient funds to support arts and cultural after school programming remains. When funding sources do emerge, there is a lack of time allotted for adequate planning to develop effective collaboration between arts organizations and after school providers. As a result, there are lots of effective arts after school programs that do not survive due to lack of funding. In addition, it is difficult to find support for arts-based after school programs outside of the Boston area, as several of the major private funders in the after school arena restrict their funding to the Boston area, and most corporate funders are also located in the Boston region.

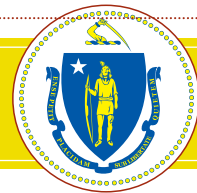
**Recognition of Massachusetts as a leader in arts after school programming, due in large part to the depth and breadth of the cultural institutions in the state.** Other states around the country look to Massachusetts as a state with a unique availability of cultural resources. The state has had a disproportionately large number of Coming Up Taller Awards, an award that recognizes exemplary arts after school programs. Under the leadership of the Massachusetts Cultural Council (MCC) the state can take advantage of this opportunity, as MCC has a proven track record of stewardship of after-school funds through its Youth Reach Program. State leadership should maximize these resources to increase the availability of arts after-school opportunities across the state.

Arts and cultural programming can be a powerful tool to help young people make sense of the challenges they face. Meaningful experiences in the arts and humanities can help foster positive growth that is essential to becoming a successful adult. There is an important opportunity for Massachusetts to recognize the importance of arts in after school programming and to increase the state's commitment to making these opportunities available to more youth around the state.

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Interview with Eric Bachrach, Springfield Community Music Center, August, 2007.

Interview with Marinell Rousmaniere, MYTOWN, Inc., August, 2007.

Massachusetts Cultural Council's Youth Reach Program

<http://www.massculturalcouncil.org/programs/youthreach.html>

America For the Arts: YouthARTS

<http://www.americansforthearts.org/YouthARTS>

## About the Author

Julia Gittleman, Ph.D. is a Principal of Mendelsohn, Gittleman & Associates, a small consulting firm that specializes in best practice research, program evaluation and strategic planning. Before forming MGA with Tom Mendelsohn, Julia began her career as a direct service provider, and then spent more than a decade designing and managing human service programs. At Crittenton Hastings House she held a number of positions over eleven years, most recently as the Chief Program Officer/Vice President of Programs. Julia has a doctorate in social policy from the Heller School at Brandeis University where her research concentrated on welfare, substance abuse and family policy.

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