



A Guide to
Arts Learning

The Transformative

Power of Art

for Systems—Impacted
Youth in New Jersey



Contents

No Boundaries Exhibit in partnership with Pasadena Unified School District & Creative Wellbeing. Photography: Dani Hagopian
Cover image photo by Rawpixel from Creative Market.

	Acknowledgements	3
	Introduction Using This Guide and Connecting to Our Why	4
Chapter 1	The Big Picture—What Does Research Tell Us about Arts Learning, and Who Supports Arts Learning in New Jersey?	7
Chapter 2	Strengthening Your Vision and Designing Your Program	16
Chapter 3	Putting It All Together—Implementation Essentials	26
Chapter 4	Connected Arts Learning—Cultivating Belonging	39
Chapter 5	Driving Continuous Improvement and Sharing Successes	48
Chapter 6	Sustaining Your Program—Building for Long-Term Impact	57
	Conclusion A Call to Action and Commitment	67
	Endnotes	68

Acknowledgements

The New Jersey State Council on the Arts would like to thank The Learning Agenda for their time, research, and collaboration on *The Transformative Power of Art*. We especially thank the authors Michelle Butler and Brenda McLaughlin, editor Erin Kane, designer Liz Scott, and project advisors and contributors Catherine Augustine, Carmen Gaines, and Chris Sweeney.

We want to extend our sincere gratitude to the New Jersey legislators who worked together to pass Bill A4500 in 2019, the impetus for this report, and the full Legislature and the Governor for formally affirming the importance of the arts in helping young people thrive.

Many of the State Arts Council's staff and board members lent their time and expertise to this project, including the Arts Education Committee and Committee Chair Kevin O'Brien, Executive Director Allison Tratner, Director of Community Partnerships and Artist Services Danielle Bursk, Director of Communications Michelle Baxter-Schaffer, and Program Officer for Arts Education and Lifelong Learning Samantha Clarke.

A special thank you to our partners at the Youth Justice Commission and the Department of Child Protection and Permanency, especially Joe Papeika, Director of the Office of Education at YJC. We also thank Shea Murray, Supervisor of the Visual and Performing Arts, at the New Jersey Department of Education for his support throughout this process.

Lastly, we are grateful to each and every arts administrator, service provider, teaching artist, and young person who spoke to us throughout this process.

To the arts organizations providing programming to young people every day: Thank you for your continued dedication to serving youth within your community. We are grateful for your resilience and your determination.

To teaching artists: We know that you are the lifeblood of this work. Thank you for sharing not only your artistry with the world, but your commitment to providing a platform for young people to develop their own artistic voice.

And to New Jersey's youth: Keep making, keep creating, keep singing, keep dancing.

We need your voice
more than ever.

Introduction

Using This Guide and Connecting to Our Why

Inspiring work is happening in communities across New Jersey to bring arts and arts learning programs to all young people, including those furthest from opportunity. Driven by the understanding that the arts are a powerful tool for youth development, the New Jersey legislature enacted [Bill A4500 in May 2019](#),¹ authorizing the New Jersey State Council on the Arts to develop a guide focused on best practices for serving systems- and justice-impacted youth through arts learning programs. This guide, intended for community-based youth arts programs and providers, does exactly that. It offers the best available information on planning and implementing high-quality arts learning programs and is inspired by a previous guide, [“YouthARTS Handbook: Arts Programs for Youth at Risk,”](#) published in 1998.²

The [New Jersey State Council on the Arts](#),³ created in 1966, is a division of the New Jersey Department of State and a partner agency of the National Endowment for the Arts. The Council was established to encourage and foster public interest in the arts; enlarge public and private resources devoted to the arts; promote freedom of expression in the arts; and facilitate the inclusion of art in every public building in New Jersey.

With support from the [New Jersey Youth Justice Commission](#),⁴ the State Arts Council engaged [The Learning Agenda](#),⁵ a national consulting firm dedicated to building the capacity of youth-serving organizations, to develop this guide. We hope it serves as a resource for community-based arts learning programs and teaching artists providing young people with inspiration, strength, guidance, community, acceptance, essential skills, compassion, and care, so they can fully express themselves and thrive.

“We’re always looking for art programs to serve traditionally underserved youth. We need more programs in economically disadvantaged communities and schools if we want to disrupt the school-to-prison pipeline. We need to invest more in prevention by implementing afterschool arts programs for teens in spaces that are safe and accessible, during the hours when they are most vulnerable.”

—Joe Papeika, *Director of Education*, NJ Youth Justice Commission

Who Do We Mean by Systems-Impacted Youth?

Throughout this guide, we use the term “systems-impacted youth” to refer to a diverse group of young people who have lived experience with public-sector systems. This term is intended to be inclusive of young people beyond those touched by the juvenile justice system and may include those served by foster care, public housing, food assistance, the immigration system, or other public programs. Systems-impacted youth may be personally involved with public-sector systems or may have family members who are. They often have [risk factors](#)⁶ that have been shown to increase their likelihood of engaging in or falling victim to crime and may lack the supports needed to grow up healthy and thriving.

We also aim to uplift the unique needs and assets of systems-impacted youth and believe the practices and lessons highlighted in this guide are broadly applicable for providers and teaching artists serving populations furthest from opportunity. Although New Jersey is one of the wealthiest states in the country with one of the nation's [top five educational systems](#),⁷ economic pressures, such as the high cost of living and generational poverty, create challenges for many families and impact the well-being of children and youth.

Who Should Use This Guide?

The primary audience for this guide is community-based arts learning providers and teaching artists, but it is designed to be useful for a variety of users invested in arts learning for systems-impacted youth. To inform the guide's content, we listened to leading providers and voices in New Jersey's arts learning ecosystem to gain their feedback about what to include. Common themes emerged, offering a glimpse into broadly held beliefs about arts learning programs. New Jerseyans shared that successful arts programs include:

- A genuine commitment to quality
- A strong belief in equity and a youth's right to fully experience the arts
- A penchant for partnership and collaboration
- A desire for continuous improvement and search for solutions
- A belief that diversity and honoring individual differences makes us stronger
- Shared core values of selflessness, fearlessness, integrity, kindness, and empathy
- A grounding of youth arts learning in positive youth development principles
- A focus on youth voice, empowerment, self-expression, and youth-centered learning
- A fundamental belief in community

We organized the guide into chapters that center these beliefs, while offering practical guidance that providers can use to design, implement, and improve arts learning that truly transforms young lives.

How the Guide Is Organized

Each chapter addresses a specific topic or aspect of program planning, implementation, improvement, or sustainability. Throughout the guide, we offer examples of programs that are making a difference for young people and, when possible, highlight how they are working with systems-impacted youth. At the end of each chapter, we provide a Practitioner Tip Sheet, summarizing key takeaways, action steps, and questions for reflection.

Feel free to move through this guide from cover to cover or take a more targeted approach by reading the chapters that are most relevant for you. You may also want to review each chapter's Practitioner Tip Sheet for quick takeaways.

Whether this is a refresher or a starting point, our common goal is to build the capacity of arts learning providers to effectively engage and empower systems-impacted youth as they explore the arts.

What's in This Guide?

Chapter 1: The Big Picture—What Does Research Tell Us about Arts Learning, and Who Supports Arts Learning in New Jersey?

As a provider, it can be challenging to stay up to date on research findings and trends while running programs and working directly with young people. This chapter summarizes key research findings and provides an overview of the arts learning ecosystem across the state. Cross-sector partnerships are essential to ensuring that youth in your programs have access to everything they need to thrive, such as housing, food, and healthcare. Deepening your understanding of the multifaceted environment for serving young people can help you forge new and stronger partnerships while meeting the holistic needs of youth.

Chapter 2: Strengthening Your Vision and Designing Your Program.

Strong programs begin with a clear vision and a deep understanding of youth needs and interests. This chapter centers the unique needs of systems-impacted youth while offering strategies for assessing needs and interests and designing aligned programs. We conclude with principles for successful arts learning programs as guidance on moving from vision to action.

Chapter 3: Putting It All Together—Implementation Essentials.

Many elements must come together to ensure quality arts programming that genuinely serves young people. Leadership commitment, physical space, and having the right staff on board, for example, are all essential ingredients. But perhaps the most important ingredient is authentic youth voice and choice. Programs must be aligned to youth interests and needs so that youth are engaged and keep returning to your program. This chapter addresses the necessary components for high-quality implementation.

Chapter 4: Connected Arts Learning—Cultivating Belonging.

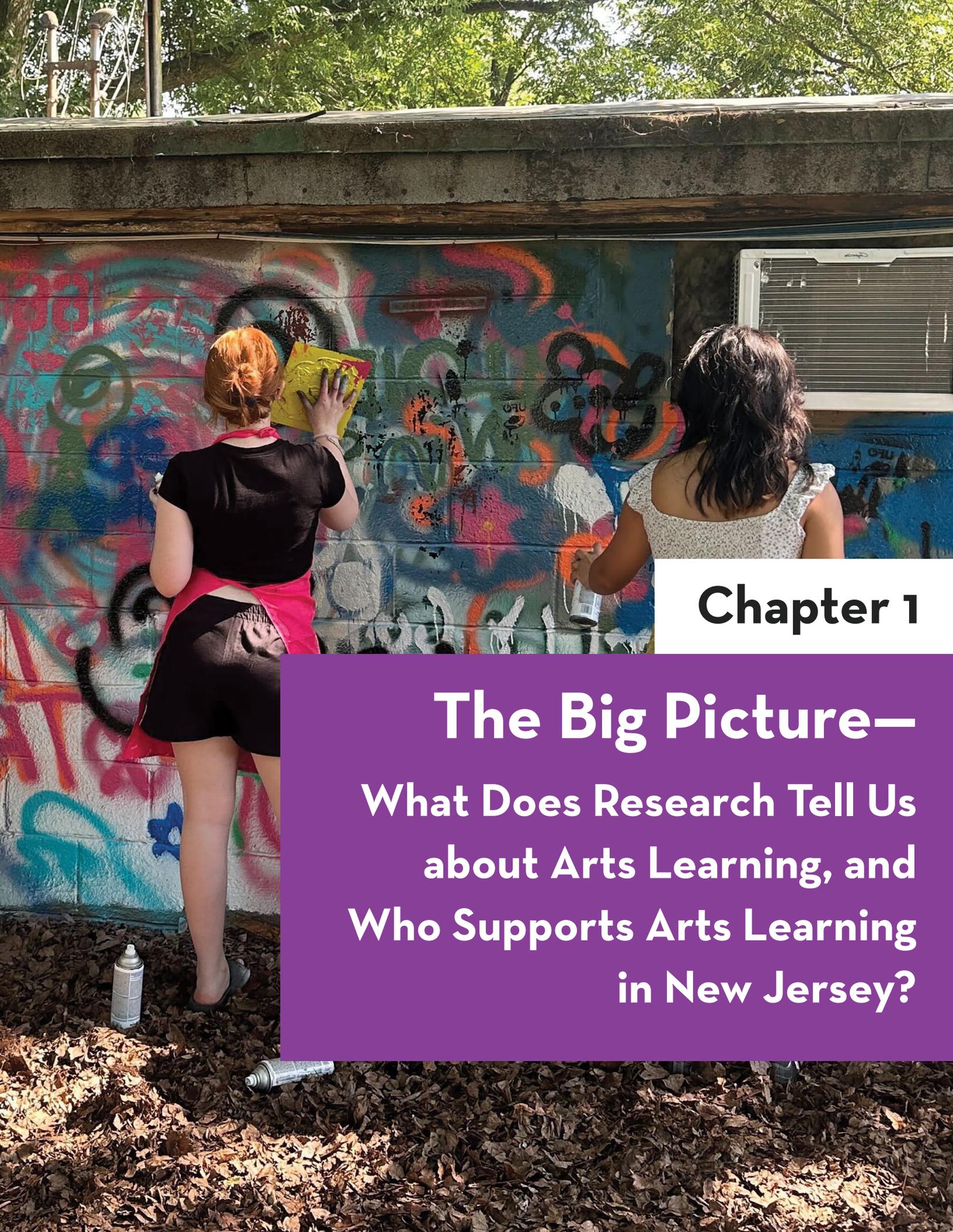
Connected Arts Learning is a framework that centers youth interests, relationships, and opportunities. When all three elements are present and fostering a sense of belonging is prioritized, young people begin to understand how their individual contributions can help communities thrive. This chapter dives into this framework to help programs develop a strong climate and culture.

Chapter 5: Driving Continuous Improvement and Sharing Successes.

Program quality, driven by committed leadership and passionate teaching artists, is arguably the most important element of a successful program. We want young people to keep coming back to offered programming because they feel valued and engaged. Arts learning providers must have a continual focus on collecting meaningful data, particularly with and from youth, and analyzing that data to inform improvements. This chapter focuses on the importance of understanding the data you have and how you can use it; monitoring quality and giving feedback; and capturing and sharing your impact in ways that honor youth voices.

Chapter 6: Sustaining Your Programs—Building for Long-Term Impact.

Sustainability is driven by many factors, including quality programming, strategic partnerships, community engagement, and diversified funding. But how do you achieve sustainability that truly serves young people over time? This chapter offers guidance on strategic budgeting and partnerships, building diversified funding streams, engaging community members, and sharing successes to advance your mission.



Chapter 1

The Big Picture— What Does Research Tell Us about Arts Learning, and Who Supports Arts Learning in New Jersey?

The Transformative Power of the Arts

Programs that meaningfully incorporate arts learning help youth develop and strengthen cognitive, regulatory, and social-emotional skills that can positively influence their futures. These programs work because they honor young people’s creativity and potential while building essential life skills.

Engaging in arts learning improves far more than just artistic skills. Research demonstrates that young people who participate in the arts achieve greater educational success overall and gain essential social competencies, including emotional regulation,⁸ empathy,⁹ critical reflection,¹⁰ and a stronger sense of belonging.¹¹

Longitudinal data tell us an even more compelling story: Children and teenagers from socially and economically disadvantaged backgrounds who have high levels of arts engagement show significantly more positive outcomes on indicators such as school grades, test scores, and high school graduation rates, compared with similar youth with low levels of arts engagement.¹² Additionally, a recent study of high-quality afterschool programs, including programs featuring the arts, showed that consistent participation during the elementary school years yields remarkable long-term benefits, including higher educational attainment, income, and occupational status by age 26.¹³

Arts programs are particularly transformative for systems-impacted youth,¹⁴ offering safe environments to grow, heal, and build community. These programs cultivate a deep sense of belonging that can help youth break negative cycles, build resilience, and reshape their futures with hope and purpose.

Arts-based interventions can take many forms, including visual and performing arts, podcasting, filmmaking, creative writing, and countless other creative expressions. Whether arts programming is integrated as prevention, intervention, or transition, it represents a uniquely engaging and nonthreatening approach to connecting with youth.



Mark Roxey's *Fall of Freddy The Leaf* with music by Robert Maggio. Photo courtesy of Roxey Ballet.

Components of Arts Education in Juvenile Justice Systems—Prevention, Intervention, Transition, and Healing

The Arts Education Partnership¹⁵ is a national network of more than 200 organizations dedicated to advancing arts education. It defined components of arts education in juvenile justice systems—prevention, intervention, transition, and healing—which can also be adapted for other systems.

- **Prevention**—One of the most effective ways to reduce risk factors that may increase juvenile delinquent behaviors is to introduce preventative programs early on that assist children, families, and their communities. Preventative programs that incorporate arts-based activities help children develop and strengthen cognitive, regulatory, and social and emotional skills.
- **Intervention**—There are multiple points throughout the juvenile justice process where arts-based programs can intervene in the lives of youth involved in the system, including during initial contact, correctional placement, and reentry. Many intervention programs take place in juvenile correctional facilities and alternative educational settings. The overall goal of these programs is to reduce recidivism.
- **Transition**—Transition programs provide support services for youth who are reentering society from out-of-home placements. Arts-based transitional programs involve collaboration between placement facilities, schools, families, and communities, providing arts activities that support a successful transition.
- **Healing**—Youth in the juvenile justice system are commonly exposed to trauma in some capacity, whether before, during, or after involvement in the system. Arts-based healing programs address these traumas and help youth build resilience, strengthen coping skills, and foster positive self-esteem through modes of art therapy.

“The arts provide opportunities for youth to explore who they are and create an environment where they feel comfortable sharing themselves with the world.”

—Erik James Montgomery, *Teaching Artist and Founder/CEO*, EJM Foundation, Camden, NJ

Arts and the Juvenile Justice System

Despite sharp, long-term declines in youth incarceration, hundreds of youth are still involved in New Jersey’s criminal legal system. The New Jersey Youth Justice Commission (YJC) leads critical reforms of the juvenile justice system and provides comprehensive services to impacted youth. For 30 years, the YJC has facilitated a cross-sector approach to holistically serve, support, and rehabilitate young people with dignity and care.

A Look at New Jersey's Young People

Every year, [Advocates for Children of New Jersey](#)¹⁶ publishes a comprehensive statewide report, [NJ Kids Count](#),¹⁷ with extensive information about New Jersey's more than 2 million children and youth. The report provides measures of child well-being across 21 counties, including demographics, family economic security, child health, child protection, childcare, and education. We encourage you to reference this valuable resource for detailed data about the young people in your community and where additional support may be needed.

Meeting Youth Where They Are

An effective way to mitigate risk factors is to offer programs that reach youth “where they are”—at places of worship, recreation centers, support groups, housing centers, shelters, ESL classes, barber shops and salons, and corner stores. Meeting young people in their own communities and spaces demonstrates respect for their lives and experiences.

In this guide, we primarily focus on arts learning in community-based, out-of-school time (OST) spaces—before and after school, weekends, and summer—where young people spend 80–85% of their time. These spaces offer unique opportunities for authentic engagement and relationship-building.

The Arts Learning Ecosystem for Systems-Impacted Youth

Because systems-impacted youth may face deeply rooted barriers such as poverty, trauma, and incarceration, it is especially important to build robust cross-sector arts learning partnerships with broad, wide-ranging capacity and expertise.

The Arts Education Partnership has developed an excellent infographic to help visualize the breadth of the arts learning ecosystem for systems-impacted youth. A strong ecosystem is about much more than art—it serves as an essential safety net and platform for healing, education, and transformation. We encourage you to think through potential partnerships, collaborations, or relationships that can be cultivated to strengthen programs for the young people you serve. We will explore developing and sustaining strategic partnerships and collaboration more deeply in later chapters.

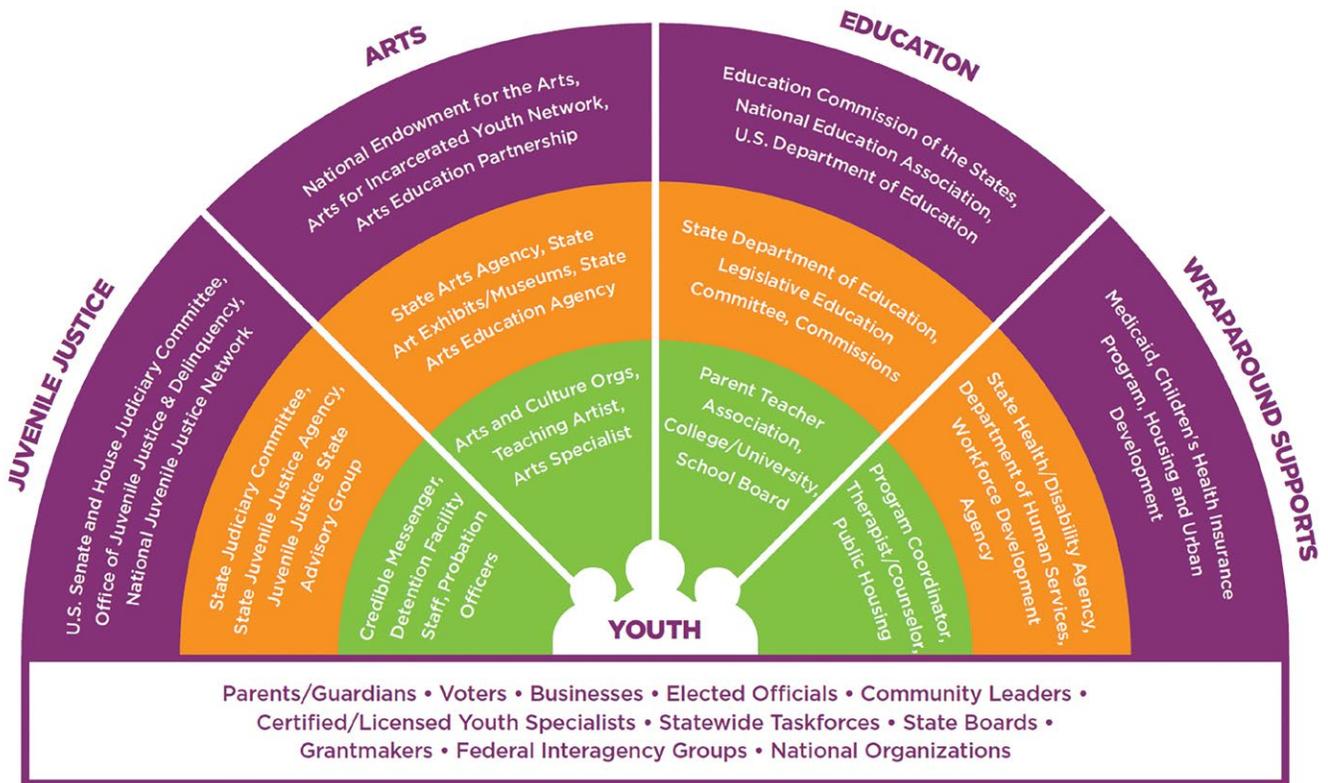


Figure: *Exploring the Arts Across the Juvenile Justice System* by Arts Education Partnership. <https://www.aep-arts.org/arts-education-in-juvenile-justice-systems>

When looking at the sectors that make up the ecosystem in the graphic—juvenile justice, arts, education, and wraparound supports—consider who the players are in your neighborhood, community, city or town, county, and region. Many organizations have a vested interest in the positive development of systems-impacted youth and would welcome collaborative opportunities to improve outcomes. Cross-sector collaboration supporting a shared vision often results in collective impact and lasting change.

“The YJC loves partnership and collaboration. Our partners and teaching artists are fearless and dedicated to our mission and vision. We know we need to develop a stronger pipeline for teaching artists and art teachers to address the critical shortage of arts educators.”

—Joe Papeika, *Director of Education*, NJ Youth Justice Commission



Mentoring Moments as part of Arts for Healing and Justice Network’s partners with Hauser & Wirth’s Education Lab. Photography: Julian Harris

Profile: Cross-Sector Collaborations from the Field

Inspiring cross-sector collaborations are happening across the state to bring the arts to systems-impacted youth.

Below are a few examples of collaborations that are innovative, deliberate, and designed to meet the needs of targeted youth populations. We've highlighted collaborators (in italics) to spark ideas about the possibilities in your community.

- **People & Stories/Gente y Cuentos**,¹⁸ Princeton, NJ: *Homelessness Intervention; Correctional Institutions; Social Service Organizations*—People & Stories/Gente y Cuentos works with participants from many partner organizations, using literature to promote understanding and dialogue across communities. Programs are offered in both English and Spanish. Partners: Children's Home Society of New Jersey, The Father Center of New Jersey, Fairton Federal Correctional Institution, Federal Correctional Institution Fort Dix
- **The Poetry Center, Passaic County Community College**,¹⁹ Paterson, NJ: *Juvenile Justice*—The Poetry Center works to increase awareness and strengthen support for cultural equity, health, environmental, and justice issues by providing literary workshops to youth experiencing incarceration. Poetry in Prison workshops embrace creativity and self-expression through writing to promote positive development and healing. Partners: NJ Department of Corrections (various facilities)
- **Keys 2 Success**,²⁰ Newark, NJ: *Housing*—Keys 2 Success brings music education and piano lessons to Newark youth in underserved areas, including public housing complexes. Partner: Pennington Court Housing Complex
- **James R Halsey Foundation of the Arts**,²¹ Trenton, NJ: *Juvenile Justice*. The James R. Halsey Foundation of the Arts empowers youth and at-risk youth, including those connected to Mercer County Juvenile Probation and Family Court, through filmmaking education, career-path training, and healing-centered support. With community partners, JRH provides a safe, holistic space for growth, healing, and future success. Community Partners: Annie E. Casey Foundation, Trenton Street Team, Capital Health's Victory Program, and Catholic Charities

New Jersey's Arts Ecosystem

New Jersey is an arts-rich state and the birthplace of numerous celebrated artists. New Jersey has been successful using data-driven strategies to achieve near-universal access to arts education in public schools and is widely recognized as a national leader in arts education. Across the Garden State, parents, teachers, and community members have partnered to protect and strengthen student access to the arts.

New Jersey participates in the [National Arts Education Data Project](#)²² and annually tracks key arts education metrics and trends over time. In-school arts education data provides an important lens for recognizing who is being served and where there are opportunity gaps, especially in communities where students have the greatest needs. Broadly speaking, we know that access to the arts begins to decrease between 6th and 8th grade, and there are fewer opportunities for youth to engage in dance, theatre, and media arts.

Beyond the education system, New Jersey's arts sector is diverse and prolific, with many interconnected elements that support creativity and engagement, including professional artists, audiences, nonprofit arts and culture organizations, funders, government entities, colleges and universities, and community-based organizations.

As you consider your arts partnerships and resources, think multilevel—state, region, county, town, city, and neighborhood.

An anchor of the arts ecosystem is the New Jersey State Council on the Arts. As the state's largest funder of the arts, the State Arts Council also provides technical assistance, training, and programs in artist services, arts education and lifelong learning, creative communities, and folk and traditional arts. Their work touches arts organizations, arts program providers, practicing artists, and teaching artists, and serves as a valuable resource for individuals and organizations alike.

Every county in New Jersey has a designated County Arts Agency (CAA) supported, in part, by the State Arts Council. CAAs serve several important functions, including regranteeing [Local Arts Program](#)²³ funds, local arts development, collaboration, advocacy, and promotion. There are many possibilities for partnerships and collaborations to benefit youth.

Navigating the New Jersey Arts Sector: Who's in Your Backyard?

As a hub of creativity and innovation, New Jersey is home to some remarkable organizations that provide direct services to the field. These organizations and many others provide benefits to arts groups, artists, and arts workers across the state. Consider connecting with:

- [Arts Ed NJ](#)²⁴
- [ArtPride New Jersey](#)²⁵
- [County Arts Agencies of NJ](#)²⁶
- [Dance New Jersey](#)²⁷
- [Mid Atlantic Arts](#)²⁸
- [New Jersey Association of Museums](#)²⁹
- [New Jersey Theatre Alliance](#)³⁰
- [Newark Arts](#)³¹
- [New Jersey State Council on the Arts](#)³²
- [South Jersey Cultural Alliance](#)³³

Mapping Resources in Your Community

New Jersey's arts infrastructure is robust and capable of supporting a coordinated approach to serving youth. For providers who may be new to arts learning, it will be essential to determine what programs, institutions, artists, nonprofits, and resources may already exist in your community. Arts mapping can be a powerful tool to explore the arts in your area and find inspiration for meaningful partnerships and innovative programming. Some initial questions to ask yourself as you get started on your mapping:

- Who is my County Arts Agency?
- Is there a local arts council in my town or city?
- What other organizations in my community offer arts programming?
(In addition to arts organizations, this may be libraries, community centers, senior centers, etc.)
- Who are the practicing artists in my community? Who are the experienced teaching artists?
- What are the arts centers/museums/galleries/performance venues in my community?
County? Region?
- What are the colleges, universities, technical schools in my community? Do they offer arts degrees or certifications?
- Who are the arts educators in the community? Who is your school district's director of visual and performing arts?
- Does your town or city have a department of arts and cultural affairs?
- Who funds the arts in your community?
- What other untapped arts resources are there?

The organizations listed in the text box on page 13 can provide you with information and resources to help answer some of these questions.

An understanding of the arts ecosystem and strong collaborations are critical to helping you achieve your program goals and to sustaining impact over time. As we move through the guide, we will continue to focus on partnerships as essential to long-term success and sustainability. Next, we consider your program's vision and values—the foundation that will guide your work with young people.

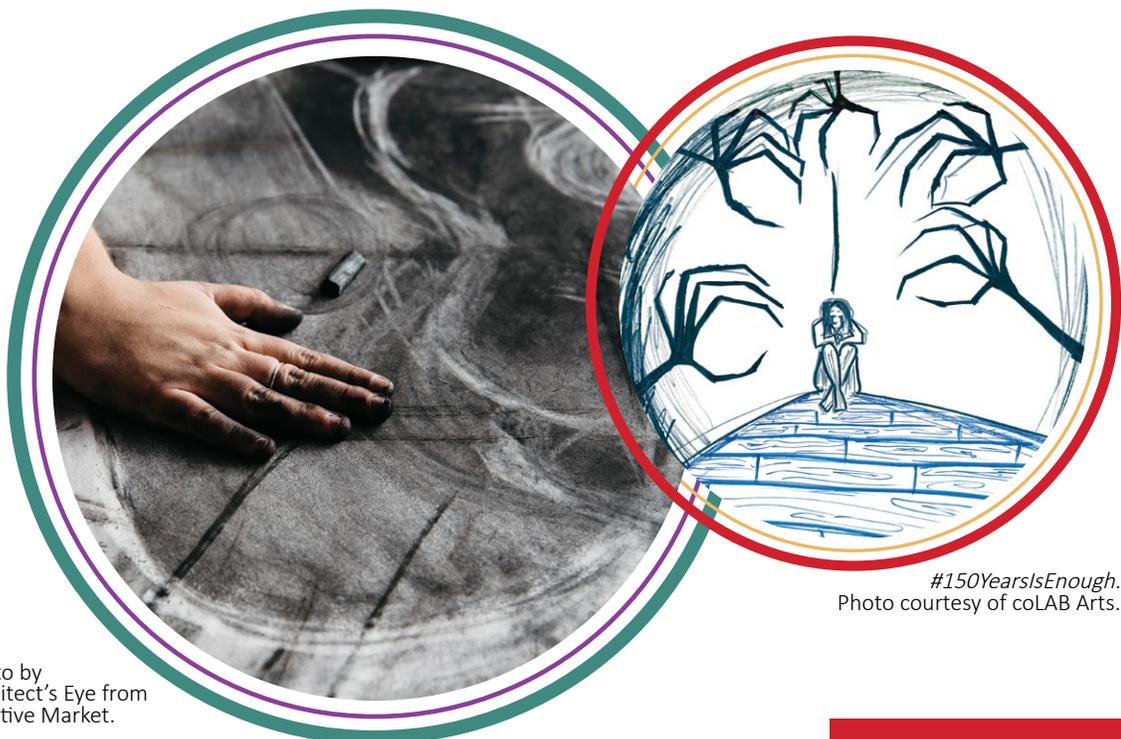


Photo by
Architect's Eye from
Creative Market.

#150YearsIsEnough.
Photo courtesy of coLAB Arts.

Research and Ecosystem Essentials

Key Takeaways:

- Arts learning improves far more than artistic skills. With short- and long-term benefits, consistent participation in arts learning strengthens emotional well-being, social competencies, academic engagement, and academic achievement. Systems-impacted youth benefit from arts programs that offer safe environments for healing, community building, and genuine belonging.
- Quality arts programming requires an understanding of the research and the local resources, practitioners, and partners that can support your work.
- New Jersey’s arts learning ecosystem is rich and vast. It can be leveraged to develop partnerships to meet youth needs.

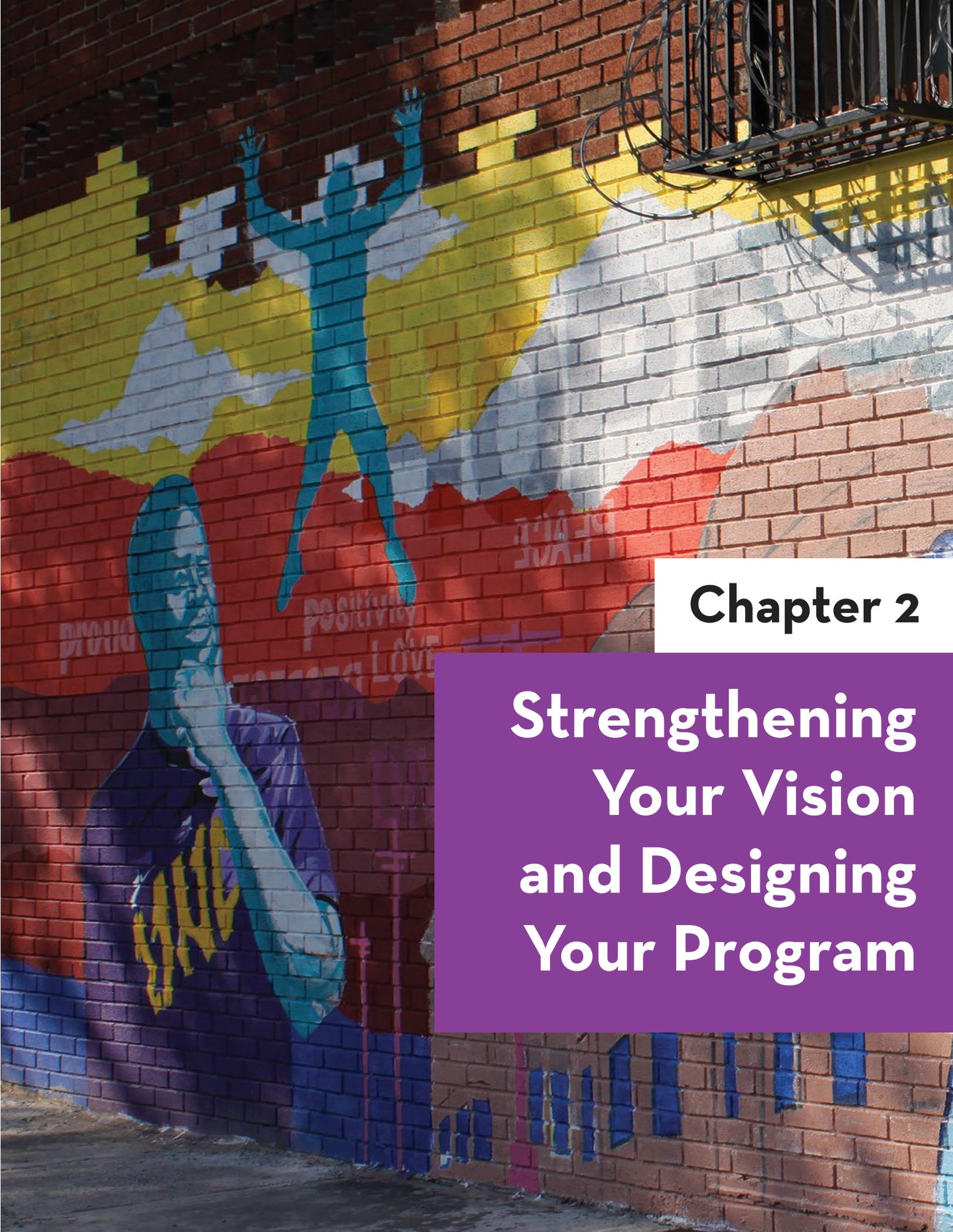
Quick Start Actions:

- Review the research literature to gain insights about what’s possible and why.
- Review the NJ Kids Count report for data about young people in your local community.
- Using the questions outlined in “Mapping Resources in Your Community,” identify 3–5 potential partners that could help you achieve your goals. Reach out to them for an initial conversation.

Key Questions for Reflection:

- How does current research on arts learning align with your program goals and design?
- Which partners could strengthen your capacity to serve systems-impacted youth?
- What community assets and cultural resources are you not yet leveraging?

Next Steps: After reviewing this chapter, you should have an understanding of why arts learning matters for systems-impacted youth and what types of resources exist to support your work. Use this foundation as you move into Chapter 2 to reflect on your program’s vision and design.



Chapter 2

Strengthening Your Vision and Designing Your Program

Defining Your Vision and Values

Strong programs begin with a clear vision and a deep understanding of youth needs. While this sounds straightforward, we know that the needs of systems-impacted youth are dynamic and can be challenging to meet while delivering high-quality programming. Each community and young person is unique and should be considered individually.

“The arts enable children to find their own voice. Without exposure to the arts, young people cannot fully realize their intrinsic value. It is up to us, the provider community, to nurture possibilities within each and every student.”

—**Sharron Miller**, *Artistic Director*, Sharron Miller’s Academy for the Performing Arts, Montclair, NJ

What Do Young People Need and Want from Arts Learning?

Working with young people requires empathy, cultural awareness, and deep understanding. While all youth share fundamental needs to feel safe, belong, have positive relationships, and experience success, systems-impacted youth often have additional needs that must be met to facilitate their meaningful engagement in arts learning.

For example, it’s essential to know if the young people in your program are struggling with housing or food insecurity, health issues, or other equally challenging circumstances. Learning about the youth in your program directly from the youth themselves helps you design projects that are relevant to their lives. Open communication can help identify additional support that is needed to allow their full participation.

The [Search Institute’s Developmental Assets](#)^{®34} framework offers an excellent starting point to gain understanding of what all young people need to thrive. Grounded in more than 30 years of research, the Developmental Assets focus on the external assets young people need in their families, institutions, and communities—such as supportive relationships, empowerment, boundaries, and constructive activities—and the internal assets that contribute to thriving—such as motivation for learning, positive values, social competencies, and positive identity. Reviewing these assets can spark ideas for conversations to have with youth and can support intentionality in your program design.

The Search Institute’s Developmental Assets[®]

External

- Support
- Empowerment
- Boundaries & Expectations
- Constructive Use of Time

Internal

- Commitment to Learning
- Positive Values
- Social Competencies
- Positive Identity

Adapted from Developmental Assets[®] by Search Institute.

Many systems-impacted youth have experienced institutional mistrust and need to feel genuinely safe before engaging. One way to combat mistrust is to prioritize building rapport before asking questions. Use consistent routines, choice, and clear boundaries and expectations to foster emotional safety. Remember that needs assessments don't have to be overly formal. Observation is a powerful tool for learning about youth in your program. What do you notice about how a young person interacts with others? What excites them, and when do they disengage?

Once trust is established, consider asking open-ended questions or using art as a vehicle for expression about how they're feeling, what they value, and what they hope to gain from your program. Through conversation or creative expression, you can invite youth to share:

- What do you want us to know about you?
- What helps you feel like your full self?
- How do you learn best?
- What do you want to get better at or try more of?
- How do you want to feel supported by adults and peers in this program?
- What would help you attend our program regularly? Are there challenges you must overcome to make it to our program?
- What helps you feel safe?
- What helps you feel respected?
- What are you most proud of?

Framing questions around strengths, talents, and resilience helps focus conversations on assets in addition to needs and honors the full humanity and potential of each young person.

“Be genuine, present, and understanding. Provide encouragement, build trust, and practice patience. Be clear about expectations and what happens next; provide pathways for continuation so youth don't see a defining end.”

—Erik James Montgomery, *Teaching Artist and Founder/CEO*, EJM Foundation, Camden, NJ

Youth as Partners: Understanding What They Want

Thinking of youth as partners and co-designers of your program can be transformative. It emphasizes designing experiences that will keep youth coming back because they feel valued and heard. [Something to Say: Success Principles for Afterschool Arts Programs from Urban Youth and Other Experts](#),³⁵ a publication from The Wallace Foundation, identifies five things youth are looking for in structured arts programs. Review the youth perspectives on the next two pages and consider the guiding questions. Does your program include these essential features?

Five Things Youth Are Looking for in a Structured Arts Program

1. Expert Instructors

Young people want instructors with real-world experience that is relevant. Credibility and the ability to inspire are essential.

Guiding Questions:

- Are instructors successful, practicing artists with real-world experience?
- Have they worked with youth before? With systems-impacted youth?
- Can they inspire young people?
- Are they seen as experts with relevant knowledge to share?
- Is their knowledge of digital media and technology current?
- Are there opportunities to engage other practicing artists for master classes or career conversations?

2. Experiential Learning in Inspiring Spaces

Young people want immersive activities and opportunities to learn by doing. They seek spaces that are open and conducive to art making and meaningful interaction.

Guiding Questions:

- Are arts activities engaging, hands-on, and project-driven?
- Do they allow for authentic voice and choice?
- Is technology/digital media incorporated where appropriate?

3. Prospect of New Friends Focused on Similar Interests

Young people want opportunities to connect with like-minded peers. Meeting new people is a key driver of participation and belonging.

Guiding Questions:

- Does the program provide opportunities for youth to meet peers outside their circle of friends?
- Are there regular opportunities to build new relationships through collaborative art-making projects and activities?



Photo by
PeopleImages.com
from Creative Market.

4. Culminating Events

Young people want culminating showcases or public events. These opportunities engage and motivate them while celebrating their growth.

Guiding Questions:

- Does the program culminate in a public event, exhibit, or performance?
- Are youth afforded meaningful opportunities to present their work?
- Are real-world venues utilized to expose youth to broader audiences and professional industry connections?
- Is healthy competition utilized thoughtfully to motivate youth artists?

5. Program Extras and Proven Incentives

Snacks, meals, branded materials, and recognition create connection. Rituals foster a sense of belonging.

Guiding Questions:

- Are nutritional snacks or meals provided?
- Are incentive/promotional materials (T-shirts, backpacks, journals) used to build identity and belonging?
- Are incentives aligned to needs, desires, and interests of your participants?
- Are there outside trips or arts experiences that would strengthen knowledge, awareness, and connections to the broader arts community?

“Our model includes holistic support for kids and their families. Together with our partners, we provide daily snacks and meals, life skills and counseling, academic tutoring, safe transportation, pantry items, and hygiene products that participants can take home and share.”

—Thomas von Oehsen, *Executive Director*, Trenton Circus Squad, Trenton, NJ

A strong program vision connects the dots between the needs and interests of the young people in your program, the outcomes you hope to achieve, and the strategies that will support you in reaching those outcomes. A compelling vision serves as a North Star for staff, ensuring that everyone is working toward the same ultimate impact for youth. Even if you already have a vision and goals, it’s a valuable exercise to regularly convene staff and discuss what you’re hoping to achieve together as a team.



Photo by AS Photostudio from Creative Market.

Profile: NOMADstudio

NOMADstudio³⁶, based in St. Petersburg, Florida, is a great example of how clearly defined mission and values statements can strengthen program offerings.

Founded in 2013 with a mission of “art for ALL,” NOMADstudio engages people in acts of creative expression in places and spaces where there is often little or no access to arts programming.

NOMADstudio has developed distinct program areas to meet the needs of unique youth populations—**Next Stop Studio**, serving youth living in high-stress, high-transition environments such as group homes; **Rolling Studio**, a mobile art bus serving neighborhood youth; **Justice Studio**, an afterschool, in-house arts program for youth experiencing detention; and **Studio on the Block**, neighborhood-based MicroCamps that provide pop-up arts programming in driveways, yards, and parks—no reservations required.

Grounding Your Vision and Goals in Youth Needs and Interests

Following is an approach to clarifying your vision and purpose and defining what success looks like. This approach can and should be used with staff at the beginning of each program cycle to ensure alignment with the needs of your specific youth participants. Consider integrating this approach as part of your staff meetings, annual refreshers, and when onboarding new team members.

Step 1: Clarify Vision and Purpose

Vision and Mission Statements

- Review your mission and vision statements. Check to ensure they align with what you hope to achieve.
 - Vision = The impact you want to have; aspirational and future-oriented
 - Mission = What you do now to achieve your vision; action-oriented and grounded in purpose

Youth Needs and Interests

- Who is your target population of young people?
- What are the greatest areas of need for your participants? How do you know?
- What are their interests? How do you know?
- What needs can be met through your program?
- How can collaboration with community partners help meet additional needs not currently being met through your program? Who might be the best partners?

Values

- What key words or phrases capture your vision for your arts learning program?
- What organizational values guide your programmatic work?

Purpose

- How would you describe your compelling “why”—the reason you offer arts learning to systems-impacted young people?

Step 2: Consider Indicators of Success

Who You Serve

- Are you already reaching systems-impacted youth effectively?
- How and where could you more effectively reach systems-impacted youth?

Quality Experiences

- What do you want young people and staff to experience in your program?
- What do youth say they enjoy and want, and how are you incorporating those experiences?
- How does staff feedback get incorporated intentionally into your programming?

Attendance

- What rates of attendance would reflect high youth engagement?
- How often and how consistently do you expect youth to participate?

Youth Outcomes

- If your work is successful, what will young people gain or accomplish through your program? In what timeframe?
- How will you know when you’ve achieved these outcomes?

Answering these questions and documenting your responses is a great way to capture and share your vision and goals with your team. Your vision and goals guide program design and shape your implementation.



Photo by Driven
by Design Creative
Agency LLC.

“We believe in youth choice and youth voice. Short pre- and post-surveys and hourlong breaking-bread focus groups with young people strengthen our programs because we receive feedback in real time to review and pivot our work. Utilizing the healing-centered engagement framework helps us build authentic, strong relationships with young people that help them share feedback openly and directly.”

—Christine Her, *Executive Director, ArtForce Iowa, Des Moines, Iowa*

Practical Application: How Might a Program Approach Step 2: Consider Indicators of Success?

Imagine that a community theatre program works through Step 2 of the visioning exercise to clarify their indicators of success.

Who You Serve: The program director realizes they're primarily reaching youth through school referrals, missing the most vulnerable systems-impacted youth who aren't in traditional school settings. They identify the need to engage with the Youth Justice Commission and other local community-based programs to discuss ways to expand their outreach.

Quality Experiences: Staff envision youth feeling safe to take creative risks and want youth to experience the thrill of performing for real audiences. Youth surveys reveal they want more opportunities to write their own material and choose where they perform. Staff request healing-centered training to better support youth during writing exercises and emotionally intense rehearsals.

Attendance: The team sets a goal of 75% attendance over their 12-week program cycle. They commit to tracking not just attendance but also reasons for absences to understand and address barriers systematically.

Youth Outcomes: After the 12-week program cycle, youth will report increased confidence, develop at least two new performance skills, and contribute to an original theatre piece. They'll measure these through youth self-reflections and teaching artist assessments.

Photo courtesy of
The Institute of Music
for Children.
Photography:
Jo Hayes Images



Rikers Island. Photo courtesy of Artistic Noise.

Moving to Implementation: 10 Principles for Effective, High-Quality Arts Programs

Your vision is refined. You know what success looks like for your program. Youth voice has been continually elevated to help you shape programming that truly serves their needs and interests. Our next chapter shifts to implementation—what you need to do to make your vision a reality for the young people you serve. We will draw upon the 10 Principles of High-Quality Afterschool Arts Programs³⁷ to ensure we’re implementing with the quality and intentionality that systems-impacted youth deserve. Keep this graphic in mind as you move to the next chapter.

10 Principles for High-Quality Afterschool Programs

- 1 **Employ professional teaching artists**
- 2 **Executives commit to high quality**
- 3 **Create dedicated, welcoming spaces**
- 4 **High expectations and respect for creativity**
- 5 **Hold a final, public event**

- 6 **Adults foster belonging and acceptance**
- 7 **Youth help lead and shape programs**
- 8 **Use current equipment and technology**
- 9 **Community supports youth and programs**
- 10 **Space is physically and emotionally safe**

Adapted from *10 Principles for High-Quality Afterschool Arts Programs* from “Something to say: Success principles for afterschool arts programs from urban youth and other experts.” The Wallace Foundation.

Program Design Essentials

Key Takeaways:

- Strong programs begin with a clear vision and deep understanding of youth needs and assets; systems-impacted youth often have additional needs that must be met to facilitate sustained engagement.
- Youth should be viewed as partners and co-designers of your program.
- A compelling program vision connects youth needs and interests, desired outcomes, and implementation strategies—serving as a “North Star” for your staff.
- The Search Institute’s Developmental Assets® framework and the five things youth are looking for from a structured arts learning program provide research-backed guidance for meeting youth needs and designing high-interest programs.

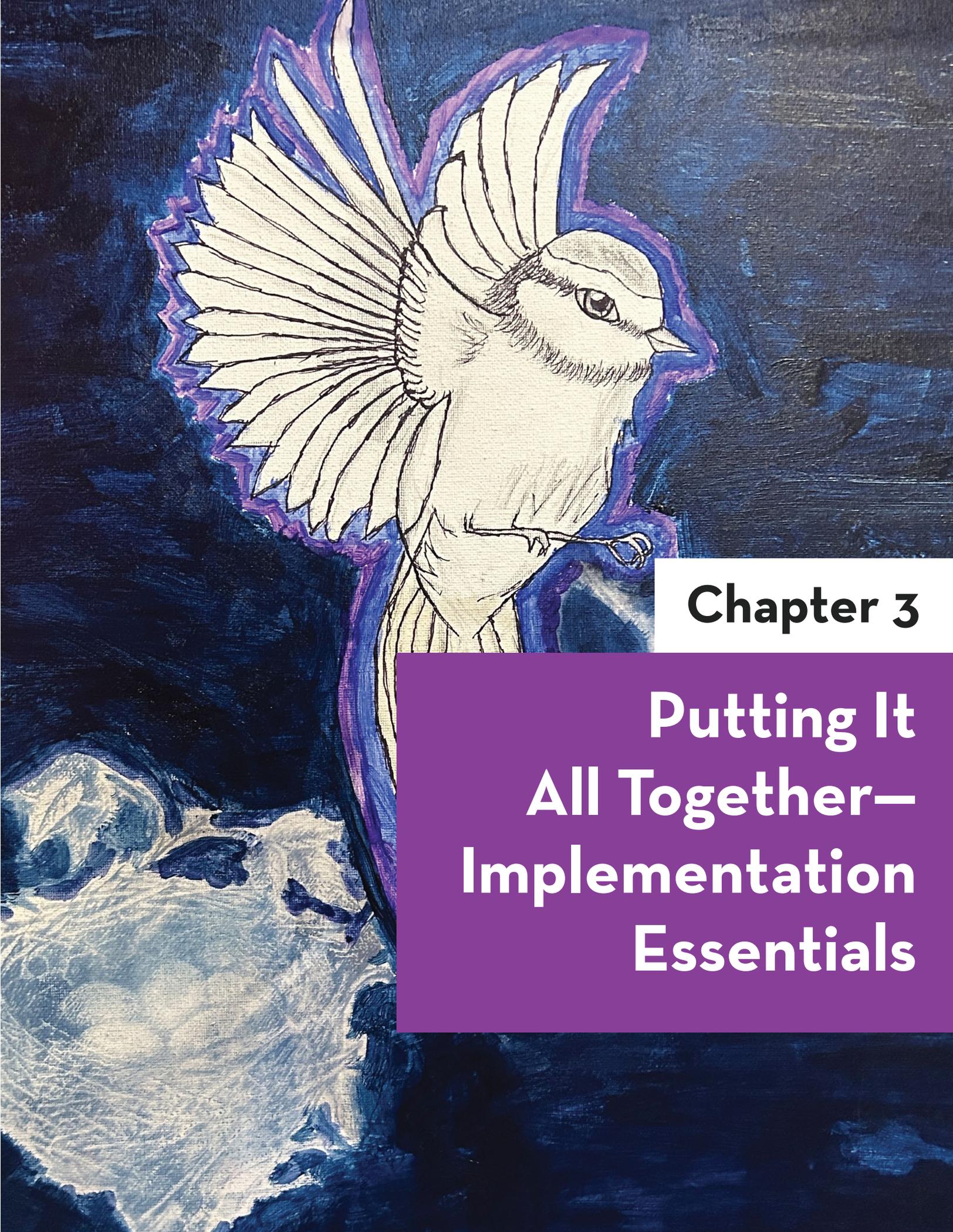
Quick Start Actions:

- Determine the best way to assess the needs and interests of youth in your program: Observation? Informal conversations? Creative expression?
- Review The Wallace Foundation’s publication, *Something to Say*, and learn about five things youth are looking for in structured arts programs.
- Engage staff in a process to review your vision, values, purpose, who you serve, and what you hope to achieve; use this process to onboard staff and to inform your program design and implementation.

Key Questions for Reflection:

- What are the greatest needs and interests of youth in your program?
- How can you build authentic rapport and trust before conducting formal needs assessments with systems-impacted youth?
- Does your program include the five essential features that youth are looking for in structured arts programs?
- How does your current vision connect youth needs, desired outcomes, and strategies for achieving impact?
- Do staff have a deep understanding of your vision, purpose, and definition of success?

Next Steps: After clarifying your vision and understanding what youth want, you’re ready to move to implementation. In Chapter 3, you’ll learn about the essential components needed to put your vision into action with quality and intentionality.



Chapter 3

Putting It All Together— Implementation Essentials

Essential Components of Quality Arts Learning

Equipped with a strong vision and thoughtfully designed program that meets the needs of systems-impacted youth, you're ready to dive into implementation. Many elements must come together to ensure high-quality arts programming that truly serves young people. As introduced in the previous chapter, The Wallace Foundation has done considerable work in this area and offers the following principles of high-quality community arts programs: experienced teaching artists, leadership commitment to quality, dedicated spaces, high expectations, culminating events, positive relationships, youth input, hands-on skill building, community engagement, and physical and emotional safety.

This chapter draws upon The Wallace Foundation principles while centering:

- Committed leadership
- Teaching artists and staff
- Appropriate and safe spaces
- Arts learning content
- Youth recruitment and retention

Committed Leadership

Leadership is one of the most critical elements of program success. Leaders at all levels—board members, executives, program managers, planning committee members, and teaching artists—need to be genuinely committed to both high-quality arts learning and to effectively serving systems-impacted youth with dignity and respect. When thinking about leadership, ensure investment in your program beyond one person. Establishing a planning team or advisory committee can support fresh ideas, essential resources, shared ownership, and long-term sustainability.

Consider the qualities of an effective leader:

- Values the arts and has a shared understanding of what quality arts learning looks like in practice
- Understands the unique needs of systems-impacted youth and believes wholeheartedly in their ability to thrive
- Actively allocates resources, makes meaningful connections, and leverages relationships for the program
- Invests in experienced teaching artists and program staff through empowerment, collaborative planning, professional development, and fair compensation

Teaching Artists and Staff: The Heart of Your Program

Experienced teaching artists are the single most important investment and determinant of arts learning quality. But who is a teaching artist?

A teaching artist³⁸ is a practicing artist who works to deliver arts learning experiences that are informed by artistic processes, are engaging and relevant, are developmentally appropriate, and are grounded in positive youth development principles.

Teaching artists, in addition to being accomplished in their artistic field, must understand the needs of systems-impacted youth and have both the expertise and temperament to create environments that cultivate creativity, joy, and self-expression.

Youth participants look to teaching artists to know more than they know, to connect them to real-world knowledge and opportunities, to teach them techniques using relevant equipment and technology, and to nurture their development without judgment. This is both a privilege and a significant responsibility.

Recruiting, training, and retaining quality teaching artists is key to implementing and sustaining arts learning programs. When recruiting teaching artists, circle back to your youth participants. Who are they, and what are their unique needs and strengths? Your teaching artists need to be skilled at teaching art form-specific techniques and processes, as well as qualified to effectively work with the population you are serving. For example, you may choose a different teaching artist for a spoken word program for justice-impacted youth than for youth in foster care. Or the same individual may be able to work effectively with both populations but might need some additional training and support.

Background Checks

Most organizations working with youth require teaching artists to have the following: FBI and State of New Jersey background checks, Criminal History Record Check, Fingerprint Criminal History Record Information, and Child Abuse History Clearance. It is important to understand state laws and requirements in place to safeguard youth.

However, there are programs that embrace the participation of returning citizen artists, who can become mentors, speakers, guest artists, or teachers for system-impacted youth. Often, this involves more extensive training and supervision, but the engagement of adults with lived experience can be particularly transformative for youth.

Approach hiring teaching artists with intentionality and a focus on the youth you will serve. If candidates lack expertise in a specific area, consider professional development, training, or mentoring to build skills. New Jersey has many professional development and training resources available to strengthen teaching artist capacity, both within the arts education sector and across sectors (health and human services, juvenile justice, etc.). When reviewing professional development and training options, be specific and look for quality. Thoroughly vet providers, get referrals, and ask detailed questions.

“Intentionally selecting artists who share lived experiences with the communities served is crucial. Shared connectedness sets a tone of mutual understanding and invites the communities served to see themselves in the artists teaching them. This also provides opportunities for artists who come from marginalized communities to grow their work experiences.”

—Christine Her, *Executive Director, Artforce Iowa, Des Moines, Iowa*

Professional Development Resources

There are many valuable professional development and training resources available within New Jersey’s arts learning ecosystem. There are also great resources available from regional and national associations and organizations. Some resources are fee-based; others are free of charge. Following is a list to get you started on your professional development journey. Remember, your needs—participant needs, teaching artist needs, program needs—should drive the type of professional development and training you choose.

- [Arts Ed Newark: Healing-Centered Engagement](#).³⁹ Four-part healing-centered training and digital book for arts educators and community members to gain a deeper understanding of trauma and learn arts-based strategies and healing-centered practices to facilitate learning.
- [Arts Ed NJ: Empowering Artists: Designing Student Centered Learning Driven by the 2020 NJSLS-VPA Certificate Course](#).⁴⁰ This asynchronous, self-paced, 12-module course provides a deep understanding of the New Jersey Student Learning Standards-Visual and Performing Arts through the implementation of Culturally Responsive Arts Education (CRAE) and Social Emotional Learning (SEL).
- [Correctional Education Association Region 1](#).⁴¹ The [Correctional Educational Association](#)⁴² is the only organization of and for educators serving at-risk youth, juveniles, and adults experiencing incarceration, and returning citizens. It is the leading organization for those working with juvenile justice-impacted youth in alternative, neglected, delinquent, and institutional education programs. CEA offers monthly [Professional Development Lunch & Learns](#),⁴³ a professional development webinar series, and an annual conference.
- [National Guild for Community Arts Education](#).⁴⁴ The National Guild for Community Arts Education offers dynamic trainings and other relevant resources.
- [New Jersey State Council on the Arts: Opportunities For The Field](#).⁴⁵ This monthly newsletter is curated by the State Arts Council and includes opportunities for artists and arts organizations. Opportunities include professional development workshops, grant announcements, calls for artists, resources, and more.
- [New Jersey Performing Arts Center \(NJPAC\)/Rutgers-Newark School of Arts and Sciences: Teaching Artist Certificate Program](#).⁴⁶ Five-week, holistic training in justice-oriented arts education pedagogy and business practices; focus on culturally-responsive teaching practices and importance of arts engagement in fostering social and emotional growth.
- [NJSACC, New Jersey’s Afterschool and OST Professional Network: Professional Development](#).⁴⁷ New Jersey School-Age Child Care Coalition (NJSACC) provides a variety of professional development experiences to meet the diverse needs of NJ’s Afterschool and OST Professional Network.

As you approach hiring teaching artists, consider whether your candidates meet these qualifications:

- Practicing artists with art form-specific knowledge of technique and deep understanding of the artistic processes
- Able to create engaging arts learning lesson plans guided by the artistic processes—creating, performing/presenting/producing, responding, and connecting
- Equipped and experienced to teach systems-impacted youth with cultural awareness
- Properly vetted and (if applicable) have completed background checks and state requirements for working with youth

Appropriate and Safe Spaces: Creating Environments for Growth

“Systems-impacted youth need safety and social-emotional health so they can put pen or charcoal to paper, without risk of ridicule, and tell their story.”

—Joe Papeika, *Director of Education*, NJ Youth Justice Commission

Arts learning programs should be held in spaces that are inspiring, welcoming, and have an atmosphere that affirms creativity and the inherent value of artistic expression. At minimum, the space needs to be conducive to the art form being taught. For example, a spoken word program may need nothing more than a room with a microphone, podium, whiteboard, and comfortable seating; a podcasting program may need a soundproof room or recording booth with professional film and audio equipment.

Regardless of the specific program, the space needs to support quality production of art. Participants deserve access to current equipment, technology, and materials. If you’re thinking, “We can offer the program, but our space isn’t appropriate,” consider connecting or partnering with others in the ecosystem who have the space and equipment you need. Often, organizations and facilities have equipment that is underutilized and would welcome partnership.

To effectively reach systems-impacted youth, consider where they naturally congregate and spend time. Nontraditional spaces—laundromats, barber shops and salons, housing developments, recreation centers, one-stop career centers, community health centers, and community-based organizations—can be great venues for arts learning.

What Do We Mean by “Safe Spaces”?

When we refer to “safe spaces,” we mean both physically and emotionally safe environments where youth feel comfortable expressing themselves authentically without fear, criticism, or judgment. Systems-impacted youth have often experienced some degree of trauma and may inherently distrust adult-led programs, so establishing a safe, nurturing, positive climate and culture is absolutely essential. Positive relationships—peer relationships and relationships with caring adults—are key to creating a genuine sense of belonging and acceptance for all young people. Create safe spaces that provide opportunities for the development of positive relationships and support a culture that promotes mutual respect and collaboration.

To promote an emotionally safe environment, there are many instructional strategies that teaching artists can utilize, including healing-centered programming. Healing-centered arts programming uses the arts as a vehicle to express and process emotions associated with trauma while building resilience, safety, and well-being. By placing the focus on the creative process, arts learning programs are uniquely positioned to address trauma and promote healing with appropriate staffing and professional development.

Valuable practitioner training and professional development resources are available for teaching artists, including through [Arts Ed Newark](#)⁴⁸ and the [Bartol Foundation](#),⁴⁹ located in Philadelphia. The Bartol Foundation provides free professional development for teaching artists in all disciplines and online asynchronous training. Another valuable resource, *[A Model for Trauma-Informed and Healing-Centered Practice through the Arts](#)*,⁵⁰ is available through the Arts Education Partnership.

Professional Development: Healing-Centered Practice, Arts Ed Newark

Arts Ed Newark (AEN) is an arts education intermediary located in Newark that works to improve arts access for all Newark youth. In partnership with leading experts, AEN developed a four-part healing-centered training and digital book for arts educators, helping them understand trauma and incorporate arts-based strategies and healing-centered practices. The training provides an understanding of trauma, tools and strategies, safety plans, and qualities of a healing community. The training was developed in partnership with the National Endowment for the Arts, NJ Office of Resilience, Save the Music Foundation, and Greater Newark Healthcare Coalition, among others. Nearly 500 New Jersey teaching artists, educators, and community members have been trained.

Arts Learning Content: The Core of Your Program

At the center of your arts learning program is content. Content refers to the subjects, concepts, or themes explored through artistic activities. Arts learning content can be discipline-based, focusing on a particular subject like music, theatre arts, or dance, or be leveraged as a powerful tool to teach and understand other subjects. This method is known as arts integration. As you plan the content of your arts learning program, there are several important elements to consider.

Art Is for Everyone

Set the tone that, in this space, everyone is an artist, and as artists, each individual's participation is affirmed and valued. Challenge all youth to find their voice and share it courageously with the world through their art. Be clear in setting collaborative norms; affirm exploration, experimentation, and thoughtful risk-taking. Make real-world associations and connections; the more relevant the content, the more authentic engagement you will witness.

Developmentally, adolescents and young adults need meaningful opportunities to assert their voice and choice, which they will demonstrate by deciding if your program is worthy of their time and energy. Recall and review the needs and interests of youth that you identified in Chapter 2.

“I never thought I’d be good at any of this, but [my arts program] made me feel like I could actually do something. Everyone works together to create something, have fun, and grow without even realizing it. It’s the first place where my confidence really showed up.”

—Youth Participant, 17

Design projects and activities aligned with needs and interests and nurture individual expression. Whenever possible, connect to the lived experiences and perspectives of young people. Integrating contemporary youth culture into the program is an effective way for youth to engage in conversation about topics they find familiar and relevant. Think about relational access points to capture their interest and elevate their voices. Provide opportunities for leadership, co-creation, collaboration, and affirmation.

Adopt Culturally Relevant and Responsive Materials

In addition to tapping into contemporary youth culture, it is essential to be culturally relevant and responsive in both content and instructional strategies. Culturally responsive arts learning embraces a young person’s cultural background and lived experiences through purposeful integration into curriculum and instruction. This approach embraces cultural identity and diversity as a strong foundation to foster a sense of belonging.

New Jersey is remarkably diverse; over 130 languages are spoken and more than a third of residents speak a language other than English. Culturally responsive arts programming leans into cultural richness, engages diverse artists, uplifts youth voice, and provides space for exploration and expression of cultural heritage and identity.

There are excellent culturally responsive arts training and professional development resources available in New Jersey for teaching artists and arts learning practitioners, including the [Culturally Responsive Arts Education Workout](#)⁵¹ (CRAE) available through Arts Ed NJ.



Photo by Ylivdesign from Creative Market.

Profile: Teaching Artists and Culturally Responsive Programming

New Jersey is rich in cultural diversity and home to vibrant immigrant communities. Here we discover two teaching artists who embody cultural responsiveness in their instructional strategies, in the communities in which they work, and in the art that they create. We encourage you to learn more about these accomplished artists and the impact their culturally responsive instructional strategies have had on young people's sense of self, belonging, and connectedness.

- **RescuePoetix™**— RescuePoetix™, New Jersey's 2022–2024 Beat Poet Laureate and Jersey City's 2020–2022 Poet Laureate, is a longstanding member of Jersey City's underground arts scene. She is the city's first person of Puerto Rican descent appointed to this position and proudly celebrates her Latin roots through poetry. RescuePoetix™ works with young people through partnerships and in community spaces where youth spend their time—community centers, public housing, churches, cafes, libraries, and spaces welcoming to diverse communities including LGBTQ+ and immigrants—to provide multidisciplinary workshops and experiences. Core to RescuePoetix's work is making learning student-centered, relevant, and respectful of young peoples' language, culture, and background. Programming includes hip-hop, spoken word, and multidisciplinary events and experiences integrating words, music, and visual arts.

Featured Projects: As former Beat Poet Laureate for New Jersey and Poet Laureate for Jersey City, RescuePoetix™ is deeply engaged in working with youth and spearheading collaborative multidisciplinary events that lean into Latin culture. These projects have included free poetry workshops celebrating poetry and jazz, verse and visual arts exhibitions celebrating collaborative artwork created by painters and poets, and open mic events.

- **Willie Cole**—Willie Cole is a contemporary American sculptor, printer, designer, visual artist, and teaching artist from Somerville, New Jersey. He is best known for work reflecting traditional African imagery using found objects. His work has been widely exhibited at major museums across the world, including one-person museum exhibitions, traveling survey exhibitions, and "Represent: 200 Years of African American Art" at the Philadelphia Art Museum.

As a teaching artist, he explores African and African American imagery, objects, themes, and issues and challenges young people to consider identity and find meaning in the repurposing of found objects. He has collaborated and taught with Rutgers University, Newark Museum of Art, and numerous art centers, cultural institutions, and colleges and universities. A core aspect of his teaching is the importance of understanding the past and its impact on shaping perceptions of the future.

Featured Project: As artist-in-residence at [Express Newark](#),⁵² Willie Cole worked collaboratively with community members and students to create art installations supporting the theme "Aliveness." Artists were encouraged to explore the relationship between contemporary art, racial freedom, and environmental justice. Two large-scale chandelier-like sculptures were created with 3,000 plastic water bottles and metal wire. The project called attention to the water crisis, the impact plastic has on cities like Newark, pollution, and environmental justice. Artists were challenged to repurpose objects and consider upcycling, ecological responsibility, and purpose.

Make It Hands-On

The most engaging arts learning programs focus on hands-on skill-building, sometimes referred to as experiential or kinesthetic learning. Hands-on learning involves direct, active engagement with materials and tasks to develop new skills. Participants roll up their sleeves, dive into the work, and learn by doing—a core element of quality arts learning programs. Youth engage with materials, equipment, and technology in the artistic process of creating.

Hands-on skill-building can be powerful when connected to real-world projects that allow participants to apply skills and knowledge, think critically, and collaborate effectively. Real-world projects offer young people opportunities to make informed decisions, plan and set goals, and articulate their artistic vision.

Arts learning programs that culminate in an event that showcases youth art to a real, engaged audience can incentivize engagement, boost sense of purpose and belonging, and connect young people to their broader community.

A valuable tip is to begin your program with the end in mind and actively engage youth in planning the culminating event. This approach builds ownership, encourages creative brainstorming and participation, and sends a clear message that their work has real value, and their voices truly matter.

The Four Artistic Processes

For community arts learning programs, whether a workshop, a class, a program, or a course, providers should develop unit plans and lesson plans to guide arts learning instruction. As you're developing unit plans, consider incorporating the four artistic processes into your curriculum. Together, the four artistic processes build artistic literacy and should guide the creation of meaningful arts learning content.

- 1 Creating**—Generates and conceptualizes artistic ideas, organizes and develops those ideas, and refines and completes the work. Creating includes the initial stages of artmaking, beginning with idea generation.
- 2 Performing, Presenting, and Producing**—Focuses on the execution of artistic work through performance (e.g., dance, music, theatre); interpreting and sharing artistic work, often through an exhibition (e.g., visual arts); and realizing and presenting artistic ideas and work, usually through the media arts.
- 3 Responding**—The process of understanding and evaluating how the arts convey meaning; responding involves analyzing artwork to fully consider its significance.
- 4 Connecting**—Relates artistic ideas and work to personal experiences, as well as to societal, cultural, and historical contexts.

Arts Education Quality Standards

NJ Student Learning Standards for Visual and Performing Arts (NJSLS-VPA)⁵³

The NJSLS-VPA were developed for schools to ensure equitable access to quality arts education. They offer grade-level standards as a helpful guide to align, support, or reinforce learning. The standards are organized by arts discipline: dance, music, visual arts, theatre, and media arts. The standards were updated in 2020 and are slated to be revised in 2026. While community-based programming does not require direct implementation of the Visual and Performing Arts Learning Standards, they provide a roadmap for curriculum design to reach learners of all ages and in all settings.

Another useful tool to inform curriculum design is the Arts Education and Social Emotional Learning Framework,⁵⁴ which is a crosswalk between arts learning standards and social-emotional learning competencies.

Youth Recruitment and Retention: Building Sustainable Engagement

How do you effectively recruit systems-impacted youth for your program? In many cases, recruitment strategies will rely on partnerships with agencies or organizations that currently serve young people across various systems—juvenile justice, health and human services, food security, immigration, and specific communities. The ecosystem we discussed in earlier chapters becomes extremely important.

Partnerships and the authentic relationships you cultivate are critical to connecting with systems-impacted youth. Just as you may be looking for partners, organizations may be actively seeking high-quality arts providers to serve their youth population but are unsure of how to find them. Partnerships can also lead to expanded funding for programming and better use of existing facilities and equipment.

“The arts support social-emotional learning, mitigate learning loss, and are an effective strategy for disrupting entry into the juvenile justice system. Better connection to cross-sector systems would serve youth well.”

—Laura Meehan, *Director, Arts Ed Newark, Newark, New Jersey*

Keep in mind that systems-impacted youth face additional wide-ranging barriers that may significantly affect their participation and sustained engagement. Consider:

- **Competing interests and responsibilities**—Choice plays a significant role with adolescents, and as consumers, they have many options competing for their time and attention. Youth are looking for programs that are fun, engaging, offer opportunities to learn something new, and have meaningful social connections. Flexibility in program design is essential.
- **Practical hurdles**—Challenges including family obligations, economic responsibilities, safety concerns, and transportation are often significant barriers that prevent sustained engagement. Flexibility in attendance policies may help support students’ engagement with your program.
- **Marketing and terminology**—What you offer and how you promote it directly impact youth interest. Instead of naming the program merely by the art form, like “dance,” be specific and compelling to pique their interest—like “Roots and Rhythm Hip-Hop” or “Beat Drop Dance Lab.”

Practical Application: How Might a Program Expand Reach Through Collaboration?

Imagine a visual arts program that partners with a nearby public housing development. Despite close proximity and strong programming, the program has consistently low participation from youth living in the development.

Partnership Approach: The arts learning program director meets with the housing development’s resident services coordinator and learns that families are hesitant about unfamiliar programs. She also learns that youth have childcare responsibilities for younger siblings, and evening programming conflicts with family routines.

Collaborative Solution: Together, they redesign the program to:

- Move sessions to the community room within the housing development
- Shift to Saturday afternoons when youth have fewer obligations
- Offer a “family art hour” where younger siblings can participate
- Have the resident services coordinator introduce the teaching artist at monthly resident meetings
- Involve youth in designing culturally responsive, bilingual outreach materials

Key Insight: Effective recruitment and retention requires meeting youth in their own community, addressing practical barriers through flexibility, and building trust through existing relationships.

By addressing these barriers thoughtfully and maintaining focus on what young people truly need and want, you can create arts learning programs that not only attract systems-impacted youth but help transform their lives through the power of creative expression and connection to caring adults and peers. The next chapter focuses on cultivating belonging and offers more guidance on strategies for sustained youth engagement.

“What I love is you don’t have to fake anything here. You can just be you. I found real friends and a passion I didn’t even know I had. It’s like the one place where I actually feel like I belong.”

—Youth Participant, 14

Profiles in Quality

While New Jersey has many high-quality arts learning programs, we’ve chosen a few whose quality is evident in program content, safe spaces, and youth voice. We encourage you to review for insight and inspiration.

- **AileyCamp**⁵⁵—Alvin Ailey believed that dance is for everybody. Founded by Alvin Ailey and the Kansas City Friends of Alvin Ailey in 1989, AileyCamp helps underserved youth realize their unlimited potential in 10 cities across the country, including Newark, NJ. AileyCamp’s six-week summer program provides youth ages 11-14 with a safe space to discover their potential through dance; importantly, dance experience is not a prerequisite. Since 2011, AileyCamp Newark has been held in partnership with New Jersey Performing Arts Center and Newark Public Schools. The program provides space to develop positive relationships, build dance skills, and strengthen self-respect and respect for others. The program uses an Ailey-developed curriculum in dance technique (modern, ballet, jazz, West African, or tap), personal development (goal setting, nutrition, conflict resolution, positive self-image, career and leadership development), and creative communications (visual arts, creative writing, personal expression). All camps culminate with a final performance at the renowned NJPAC Victoria Theatre. **Quality Focus: Arts Learning Content**
- **Appel Farm**⁵⁶—Appel Farm Art and Music Center’s mission is to co-create experiences that inspire people to unleash their inherent creativity, leading to self-discovery, personal growth, community building, and joy. Appel Farm Arts Camp is a residential camp located on a 115-acre farm in Salem County, NJ. The camp is a gender-affirming overnight summer arts camp for youth ages 8–16 offering connection and learning through an arts-based curriculum in a safe environment of community and personal growth. Through the creation of art, the camp prioritizes physical and emotional safety, community building, self-expression, and creativity. Appel Farm is a longstanding leader in social justice advocacy and piloted gender-inclusive bunks and gender-neutral bathrooms in response to the needs of transgender and gender-nonconforming campers. **Quality Focus: Safe Spaces**
- **coLAB Arts**⁵⁷—coLAB Arts’ mission is to engage artists, social advocates, and communities to create transformative new work. They facilitate conversation through innovative programs and artist infrastructure, connect artists with community partners and mentors, and execute productions that challenge perceptions and inspire action. coLAB Arts’ education programs place experienced artists in educational settings to facilitate the creation of socially engaged art. Instruction is culturally responsive and lifts the lived experiences and culture of participants, all while building community through creative expression. An exemplary project, *#150YearsIsEnough*,⁵⁸ was the culmination of months of listening to young people’s stories and experiences in the New Jersey criminal justice system. Young people from the Youth Advocate Program (YAP) created art in partnership with advocacy experts from New Jersey Institute for Social Justice (NJISJ), artists, and teaching artists from coLAB Arts. **Quality Focus: Youth Voice**

Implementation Essentials

Key Takeaways:

- Quality implementation requires multiple elements working together: committed leadership; experienced, qualified teaching artists; appropriate spaces; engaging content; and thoughtful recruitment strategies.
- Teaching artists are the single most important investment and determinant of arts learning quality. Investing in their recruitment, professional development, and retention is a priority.
- Safe spaces are physically and emotionally safe environments where youth feel comfortable expressing themselves authentically without fear, criticism, or judgment.
- Careful lesson planning centers youth interests and includes a focus on the four artistic processes of creating, performing/presenting/producing, responding, and connecting.
- Effective youth recruitment requires understanding that systems-impacted youth face additional barriers and may be reached through nontraditional spaces and community partnerships.

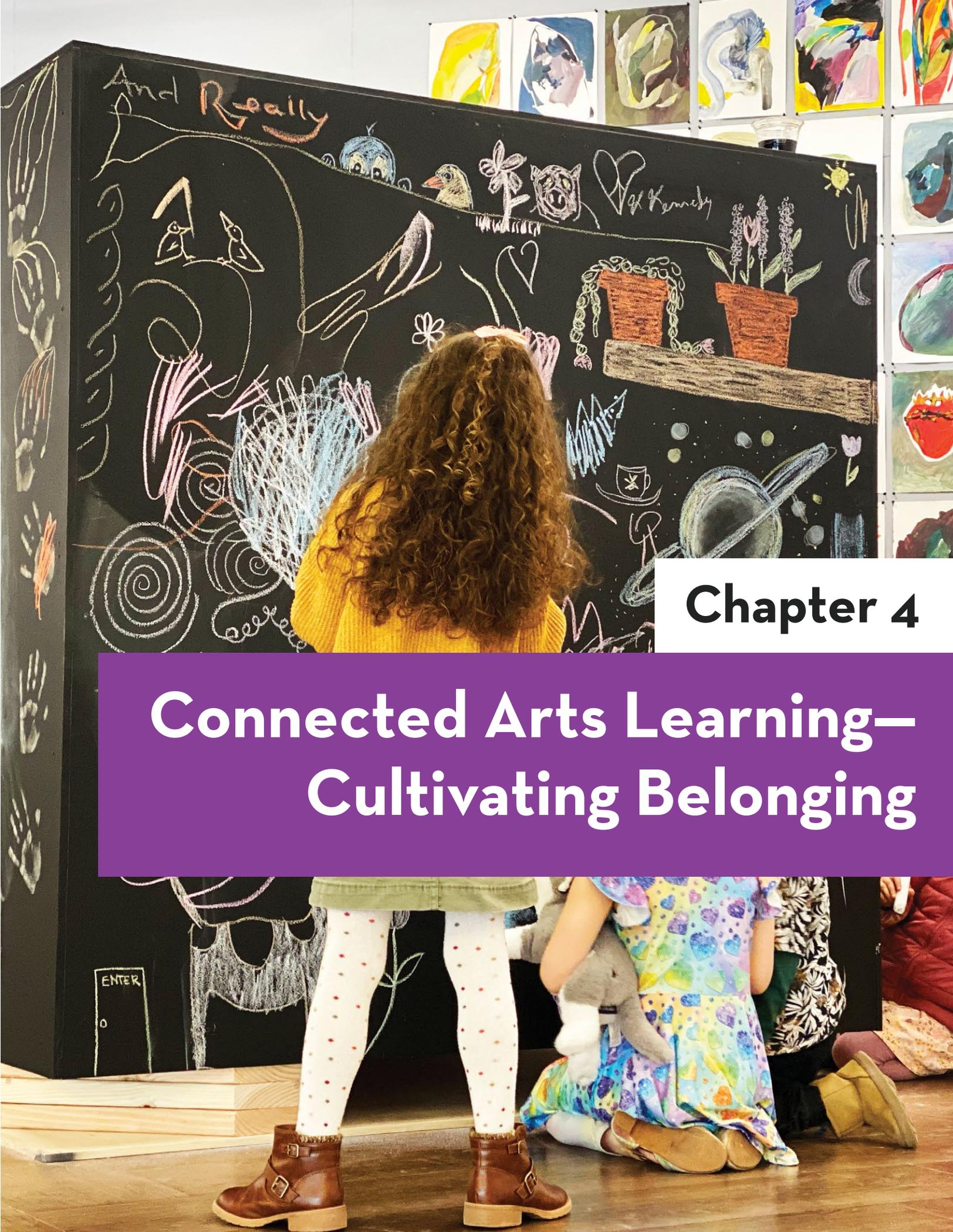
Quick Start Actions:

- Assess whether your teaching artists are practicing artists, familiar with NJ quality standards, able to create engaging lesson plans, and experienced with systems-impacted youth.
- Review your program content to ensure it includes high expectations, youth voice and choice, hands-on learning, cultural responsiveness, and culminating events.
- Examine your program marketing and terminology. Make titles specific and compelling rather than just naming the art form.

Key Questions for Reflection:

- Do you have a committed group of leaders—a planning team or advisory committee—who are contributing to your quality and long-term success?
- Do you have a common definition of what quality looks like for you that is shared across your organization?
- How are you investing in recruiting, training, and retaining quality teaching artists who can serve your specific population with cultural humility?
- Do your spaces affirm creativity and provide opportunities for relationship-building, collaboration, and self-expression?
- How effectively are you planning and delivering your content? Are your lessons engaging, contemporary, and culturally responsive?

Next Steps: After implementing quality programming with committed leadership and teaching artists, you're ready to deepen your approach. In Chapter 4, we'll move to Connected Arts Learning—a framework that centers youth interests, relationships, and opportunities to create belonging and community impact.



Chapter 4

Connected Arts Learning— Cultivating Belonging

ENTER

Connectedness Creates Transformative Opportunities

What does it truly mean to belong? In this chapter, we focus on the profound importance of cultivating a strong sense of belonging in arts learning programs, which is particularly essential for systems-impacted youth who may have experienced disconnection and instability.

Vulnerable young people often experience disrupted relationships, frequent transitions, and environments where trust becomes difficult to build or maintain. Belonging is directly linked to emotional well-being, healthy identity development, and positive long-term outcomes. For systems-impacted youth, belonging offers:

- **Emotional Safety and Resilience**—Belonging helps counteract feelings of isolation that can stem from family separation, frequent moves, or systems-involvement, creating a foundation for healing and growth.
- **Identity Formation and Self-Worth**—Young people need consistent affirmation of who they are and spaces where they “fit” and can explore their full potential.
- **Protective Factors Against Risk-Taking Behaviors**—Youth who feel connected to supportive peers, mentors, or communities are significantly less likely to engage in negative behaviors.
- **Healing from Trauma**—Young people who are systems-involved may have experienced abuse, neglect, racism, or poverty. Belonging helps repair their ability to trust and form healthy, meaningful relationships.

Pathways to Opportunity

Belonging to a stable, affirming program or community can open doors to education, employment, mentorship, and resources youth might otherwise miss, creating pathways to success.

Research-backed practices to strengthen belonging, whether in school or community-based settings, include: (1) building deep connections so that youth feel genuinely cared for by adults and peers; (2) developing responsive curricula that embrace diverse identities and teach youth how to understand and manage emotions; and (3) regularly assessing how youth feel and acting on opportunities to improve their experience.

Arts learning programs can serve as powerful drivers for belonging because the arts organically cultivate spaces for self-expression, connection, and deep identity exploration. When implemented thoughtfully, these programs become transformative spaces where young people can discover and develop their voices.



Photo courtesy of Appel Farm Arts & Music Center.

Image page 40

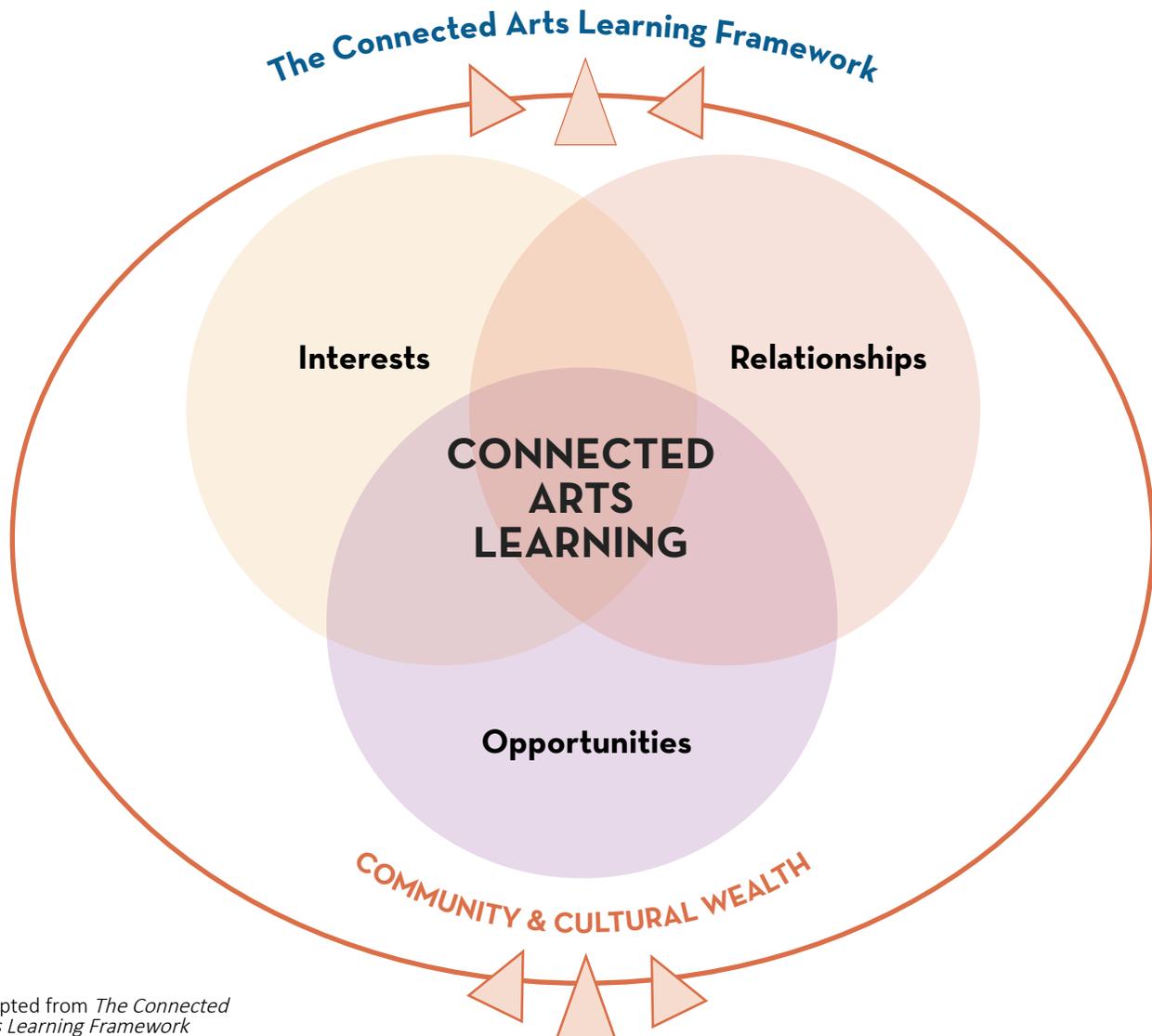
Friends We Meet Along the Way exhibition at Long Beach Island Foundation of the Arts & Sciences. Featured sculpture by Natalia Shtybel. Photography: Katherine Whitlock.

“When I started the program I was dealing with a lot of stuff. I didn’t really talk about it. [My arts program] became this place where I felt safe and seen. Creating helped me let some of that out. I didn’t expect it, but it’s helping me deal with my everyday challenges.”
—Youth Participant,16

The Connected Arts Learning Framework

Connected Arts Learning,⁵⁹ a widely used and research-backed framework available through The Wallace Foundation, recognizes that arts education contributes to far more than just artistic skills development. It also supports essential outcomes related to civic engagement, career exploration, overall well-being, and life success.

The Connected Arts Learning Framework is a holistic approach to lifelong arts learning that leverages meaningful connections. It consists of three interconnected elements: interests, relationships, and opportunities. In the space where these elements thoughtfully meet, belonging is established, strengthened, and ideally sustained over time, creating lasting impact in young people’s lives.



Adapted from *The Connected Arts Learning Framework* from “The Connected Arts Learning Framework: An expanded view of the purposes and possibilities for arts learning.” The Wallace Foundation.

Elements of Connected Arts Learning

Interest and Identity

Interest and identity draw upon youth issues that are relevant to their lived experiences. This means meeting young people exactly where they are and providing safe spaces for self-expression based on their thoughts, passions, motivations, and relevant social issues. Without judgment, invite all participants into a self-driven art-making environment. Provide opportunities for exploration of cultural identity, personal beliefs, life purpose, and youth voice.

For systems-impacted youth specifically, many struggle to be seen and heard in meaningful ways. Providing a safe space to pursue their interests and tell their individual stories creates a nonthreatening access point that can unlock creativity and nurture self-expression.

Guiding Questions:

- Is the art form of interest to youth?
- Is the project/activity developmentally appropriate and engaging?
- Does the experience leverage individual interests and passions?
- Is there opportunity for self-expression?
- Is there opportunity to explore identity and culture?
- Does the experience allow for authentic “choice” and “voice”?
- Does the art-making space feel safe and nonthreatening?

Relationships

Relationships provide essential opportunities for youth to establish positive human connections that can transform their lives. Relationships build community, and community fosters belonging. All relationships—intergenerational relationships, peer relationships, cultural community relationships, mentor–mentee relationships, family relationships—have the power to build agency, spark creativity, strengthen self-worth, help discover purpose, and, most importantly, convey acceptance, love, and kindness.

Systems-impacted youth need positive relationships in their lives. Arts learning can provide essential spaces to model healthy relationships, build trust, establish clear and effective communication, and provide the consistency that may be missing elsewhere.

Guiding Questions:

- Is there a shared understanding of norms that are developed collaboratively?
- Is staff trained in relationship building?
- Are there opportunities to build peer-to-peer trust and youth–adult trust?
- Are there opportunities for team building and collaborative group projects?
- Are there opportunities to share, present, and respond to art?
- Are there clear guidelines for respectful ways to provide constructive feedback?

“We prioritize co-creating arts and learning experiences, listening deeply to develop collaboratively designed programs in direct response to what the community tells us it needs and wants. Our goal is to build spaces for authentic engagement, belonging, healing, creativity, joy, and self-expression. We center participant input and remain flexible in our goals and plans, leaving room for regular reflection, feedback, and creativity to shape the work. Through collaboration, the arts can be a mirror of community voice and a catalyst for justice and wellness.”

—**Kristina Hill**, *Executive Leader of Education*, Appel Farm Arts & Music Center, Elmer, New Jersey

Opportunity

Fostering opportunities that make arts learning relevant and connect it to the real world beyond the program is essential. This means making connections to social issues, community priorities, organizations, and networks that could provide apprenticeships, employment, or career exploration. These connections contribute to belonging, build community, and enable youth to envision a place for themselves in the world, in and outside of the arts. Opportunity can spark interest in careers requiring transferable 21st Century Skills⁶⁰ like creativity, critical thinking, and problem-solving.

Many systems-impacted youth have adult-level responsibilities and stressors that constrain how they spend their time. Connecting to real-world issues or relevant opportunities can determine whether they participate and remain engaged.

Guiding Questions:

- How are projects connected to the community?
Through subject matter?
Exhibition/performance/presentation?
- Are career pathways explored through speakers or field trips?
- Are there opportunities to create apprenticeships, internships, freelance projects, or employment?
- How are real-world opportunities being leveraged to strengthen learning and sustained engagement?
- Are introductions made to relevant people and places that can make a difference?



John, courtesy of EJM Foundation.

Practical Application: How Might a Photography Program Use the *Connected Arts Learning Framework* to Increase Belonging?

Imagine a 10-week digital photography program for youth in foster care that struggles to get youth to engage. Youth are quiet, reluctant to share, and several stop attending after the second week.

Addressing Interests and Identity: In week three, the teaching artist pivots. Instead of teaching technical skills first, she asks youth to photograph “a place where you feel safe” and share why. The teaching artist shares her own photo first and why it makes her feel safe. This opens a conversation about safety and belonging.

Building Relationships: The teaching artist establishes a ritual where each session begins with snacks and photo sharing. Everyone shares one photo from their week and the story behind it before they jump into a lesson.

Creating Opportunities: Youth propose sharing their photos on safety in an exhibit. They call the exhibit “Where We Belong.” The teaching artist helps the group research potential exhibit spaces, and then makes connections to local galleries for the young people to pitch their ideas. The group works together to develop invitations to the exhibit, including trusted adults in the young people’s lives.

Connected Arts Approaches: Five Pathways to Impact

After extensive study of successful arts programs across the nation, five unique approaches for connected arts learning emerged, each offering a distinct pathway to engagement, transformation, and belonging:

- 1 Culturally Sustaining Arts**—Puts a community’s culture at the center of arts experiences, honoring and building upon the rich cultural assets young people bring.
- 2 Future-Forward Arts**—Prepares youth for future workforce participation or civic engagement, building skills and connections for long-term success.
- 3 Networked Arts**—Embeds art in networks including families, educators, and working artists, creating webs of support and opportunity.
- 4 Doing Well by Doing Art**—Supports participants’ health and well-being through art, using creative expression as a pathway to healing and growth.
- 5 Youth Voice Arts**—Emphasizes youth perspectives, leadership, and activism, positioning young people as agents of change in their communities.

“Youth media organizations have really been born out of social justice movements within cities: standing as the pillars of youth voice; youth choice; youth empowerment; giving young people agency over their identities, who they are, and what they want to be; and then giving them a platform to speak their truth.”

—**Kasandra VerBruggen**, *arts advocate and former Executive Director, Spy Hop, Salt Lake City, Utah*

Each approach supports an integrated strategy that connects art with other essential areas of learning and development. We encourage you to learn more about these approaches to see which resonate with you, your program goals, and your local context.

By thoughtfully implementing the Connected Arts Learning Framework, you create programs that don't just teach artistic skills; you create transformative spaces where systems-impacted youth can discover their voices, build strong relationships, and envision futures filled with opportunity and belonging.



Linocut.
Photo courtesy
of Artistic Noise.

Profile: Connected Arts Learning in Camden, New Jersey—EJM Foundation

Connected arts learning in practice focuses on youth interest, identity, relationships, and opportunity. While there are five main approaches, most programs that are doing connected arts learning embody all the elements—culturally sustaining, future-forward, networked, doing well, and youth voice—to varying degrees. The Erik James Montgomery (EJM) Foundation⁶¹ in Camden does just that.

Overview: The Erik James Montgomery Foundation’s mission is to instruct today’s youth on becoming the photographers of tomorrow. Through photography and sound instructional approaches tailored to the needs of participants, adolescents learn strategies to overcome challenges including low self-esteem, unrealistic self-image, and substandard academic achievement. Short- and long-term workshops are held at public schools, professional photography studios, correctional facilities, churches, and community centers.

Connected Arts Approach: Identity, relationships, and opportunity are core foundational principles of the EJM Foundation. Photography projects always focus on cultivating creativity and identity through conversation, reflection, excavation, and the development of photographic skills. A culturally responsive, healing-informed, safe space is established to meet the needs of each group of participants. Teaching artists prioritize building trust and are trained in instructional strategies tailored to the group. Participants are also provided opportunities to explore the business of film and digital photography, and all programs culminate in a public exhibition. Exhibiting youth artwork invites the community to learn about the importance of the artistic experience, to celebrate the young artists, and foster opportunities for connections with community members that could support their journey moving forward.

Erik is a passionate artist and entrepreneur born in New Jersey and familiar with challenges young people face growing up in low-income, high-poverty communities. As an artist and as an engaged community member, he is committed to combating social issues and transforming blight into beauty through art. While EJM Foundation has a broad New Jersey footprint, it is undeniably an integral part of the Camden community with partnerships including Camden City Hall, Camden Community Partnership, Rutgers-Camden University, Camden Fireworks, and the IDEA Center. Through cross-sector partnership and collaboration with the arts, education, and social justice communities, the EJM Foundation has taken a proactive future-facing role in addressing community issues and facilitating community conversation. The arts are front and center in the social justice space in Camden, and the arts community is an example for collaboration and connection.

Programs: EJM offers many programs and workshops, but two that demonstrate connected arts learning and commitment to systems-impacted youth include:

- **Focused on Freedom™**—Workshops for youth experiencing incarceration ages 14–18 offering direction and hope. Teens learn about the power of photographic imagery through self-portraits (including non-portrait self-portraits) and positive declarations about their future. A public viewing of images and affirmations is held at the correctional facility.
- **CAMDEN CAMERA CAMP™**—Summer photography program for at-risk youth who learn photo fundamentals from professional photographers. Workshops include positive self-esteem and self-expression. Camp culminates in a visit to the Philadelphia Art Museum.

Connected Arts Learning Essentials

Key Takeaways:

- Belonging is directly linked to emotional well-being, identity development, and positive long-term outcomes for systems-impacted youth who have experienced disconnection and instability.
- The Connected Arts Learning Framework leverages three interconnected elements—interests, relationships, and opportunities—to create spaces where belonging is established, strengthened, and sustained over time.

Quick Start Actions:

- Assess your current program against the three Connected Arts Learning elements. Are you addressing youth interests, building meaningful relationships, and creating real-world opportunities?
- Review the Connected Arts approaches (culturally sustaining, future-forward, networked, doing well by doing art, youth voice) and align with the approach(es) that best characterize your program.
- Create opportunities for youth to share their interests, passions, and cultural identities without judgment.

Key Questions for Reflection:

- How effectively are you creating spaces where systems-impacted youth feel they truly belong and can explore their full potential?
- Do your programs leverage youth interests and provide opportunities for cultural identity exploration and self-expression?
- What systems do you have in place to build and sustain positive relationships between youth, adults, and peers?
- How are you connecting your arts programming to real-world opportunities that help youth envision pathways to success?

Next Steps: After implementing the Connected Arts Learning Framework to center interests, relationships, and opportunities, you'll have created a strong foundation for belonging and community impact. Use this transformative approach as you move into Chapter 5 to learn about continuous improvement strategies that will help you monitor and enhance youth learning experiences.



Chapter 5

Driving Continuous Improvement and Sharing Successes

Arts learning providers must maintain a continual focus on collecting meaningful data, particularly with and from youth themselves, and thoughtfully analyze that information to drive improvements. This chapter focuses on the essential work of understanding the data you already have and how you can use it effectively to monitor quality, provide feedback, and capture and share your impact.

Understanding Your Data: What You Have and How to Use It

Data doesn't have to be intimidating or overwhelming. You likely already have more valuable information than you realize. The key is identifying what data you have, understanding what it tells you, and using it strategically.

Your program may use traditional quantitative methods to measure outcomes—including surveys, questionnaires, and attendance tracking. You may also use qualitative methods such as interviews and focus groups with youth participants.

Some programs also use other methods of data collection, like regular check-ins with young people or assessments of portfolios and other artwork. Below are some types of data you may want to collect:

Attendance and Participation Data

- Who's coming regularly?
- Who's missing sessions?
- What patterns do you notice in attendance?
- How long do youth typically stay engaged with your program?
- Is staff attendance consistent?
- Is staff retention high?

Engagement and Behavior Observations

- Are youth actively participating in activities?
- How do they interact with peers and adults?
- What activities generate the most enthusiasm?

Skill Development Documentation

- How are youth progressing in artistic skills?
- What creative risks are they taking?
- How is their confidence in artistic expression growing?

Youth Voice: Feedback and Satisfaction

- What do young people say about their experience?
- How do they describe what they're learning?
- What suggestions do they have for improvement?

Family and Community: Feedback and Satisfaction

- How do parents and guardians perceive the program's impact?
- What do community partners observe about participating youth?
- How do partners feel about the collaboration?

Teaching Artist Reflections

- What challenges and successes do instructors report?
- How confident do they feel in their ability to serve youth in your program?
- What support or resources do they need?

Measuring Youth Outcomes

As you consider the approach you will take to collect and analyze data, go back to the questions you considered in Chapter 2 about program goals and indicators of success. What are your program’s most important goals? How are you measuring whether you are achieving those goals?

It’s important to identify and prioritize the outcomes most aligned with your program’s mission. If you receive funding from public or private sources, you may have data collection requirements that affect future funding decisions.

Outcomes measurement doesn’t have to be overly technical, but it does need to be consistent and easily analyzed to demonstrate results. We offer some examples of youth outcomes that arts learning programs might prioritize as inspiration and encourage you to review the research shared in Chapter 1 for additional ideas.

“There’s no one-size-fits-all approach to evaluating program quality. Many families we work with are primarily Spanish-speaking households, so I prioritize site visits to have direct conversations and build trust. These interactions are invaluable for understanding how programs are actually experienced and how we can improve. Speaking directly to youth, families, and caregivers through relationship building has provided the most authentic and actionable feedback. It’s not a perfect system, but it’s responsive and grounded in relationships.”

—Samantha Giustiniani,
Vice President of Education and Outreach,
Count Basie Center for the Arts,
Red Bank, New Jersey



Photo courtesy of Appel Farm Arts & Music Center.

Youth Outcomes for Arts Learning Programs May Include:

Attendance and Participation Data

- Skill development in specific art forms
- Creative confidence and willingness to take risks
- Understanding of artistic processes and techniques
- Quality of artistic expression and final products

Youth Development and Social-Emotional Learning

- Self-confidence and self-expression
- Emotional regulation and resilience
- Goal setting and achievement
- Cultural identity exploration and pride

Social Connection

- Relationship-building skills
- Peer connections and friendships
- Trust in adults and mentors
- Sense of belonging and community

Academic and Life Skills

- Critical thinking and problem-solving
- Communication and presentation skills
- Time management and responsibility
- Future planning and goal setting

Community Engagement

- Understanding of community issues
- Civic participation and leadership
- Cultural contribution and sharing
- Mentoring of younger participants

Career Development and Connections

- Collaboration and teamwork
- Digital literacy with career-specific technologies
- Industry knowledge and career pathway awareness
- Professional network building

The Importance of Monitoring Program Quality

Once your arts learning program has clearly identified outcomes that everyone has accepted and understands, it's time to consider how you will monitor program quality. Quality monitoring is the process of observing, assessing, and measuring how well your program is being implemented.

Quality monitoring isn't about judgment; it's about care. When we strategically invest in quality, we demonstrate our belief that every young person deserves an engaging arts learning experience. While not necessary for community-based programming, it may be helpful to benchmark your program quality against the [New Jersey Student Learning Standards \(NJSLS-VPA\)](#),⁶² which are designed to support lifelong artistic literacy and fluency for all students and are based on national core arts standards.

With a growing range of research-backed assessments, you can likely find a validated quality measurement tool that aligns with your program's goals and capacity.

Quality Measurement Tools

Two leading quality measurement tools for youth programs include:

Developed by the Weikart Center at the Forum for Youth Investment, the Youth Program Quality Improvement (YPQI)⁶³ approach is a process and set of tools designed to evaluate the quality of youth programs and identify staff training needs.

The SAYO-Y,⁶⁴ a tool developed by the National Institute on Out-of-School Time,⁶⁵ collects youth perspectives and opinions in three dimensions: program experiences, future expectations, and sense of competence.

If available quality measurement tools aren't aligned with your program goals and components or if you don't have the capacity to implement specific field-validated tools, ongoing observation and feedback may be a better fit. Regularly observing your program for specific aspects of quality and sharing feedback with your staff builds a cycle of continuous improvement that gives everyone the opportunity to contribute.

Sharing effective feedback in arts learning programs requires psychological safety, where program leaders, staff, teaching artists, and youth feel comfortable sharing honest observations and suggestions for improvement. Before anyone observes and offers feedback, be sure to clarify and remind your team how the program defines quality, expectations of staff and participants, and how information will be collected and shared. Leaders who acknowledge their own areas for growth create permission for others to do the same.

Practical monitoring strategies include:

- **Observation Tools**—Develop simple rubrics or checklists that help you consistently observe key program elements like youth engagement, teaching artist effectiveness, and program climate.
- **Regular Reflection Sessions**—Build time into your program schedule for teaching artists and staff to reflect on what's working and what could be improved.
- **Youth Feedback Mechanisms**—Create multiple ways for young people to share their experiences, from informal conversations to structured surveys to creative expression activities.
- **Peer Learning**—Encourage teaching artists to observe each other's practice and share insights and strategies.
- **Documentation**—Keep records of what you try, what works, and what doesn't so you can build institutional knowledge over time.

Remember to recognize and appreciate efforts to improve, not just final outcomes. The best programs are the ones that never stop asking, "How can we do this better?" and actively listen to the answers, especially when they come from the young people we serve.

“Listening is not only a function of our work in the fields of music and sound, but also fundamental to understanding ourselves, deepening our connection to nature, and enriching relationships with others in our personal and professional lives. Listening is empathetic, vulnerable, and even political.

Most of us rely heavily on sight to navigate our daily lives and unconsciously filter out the abundant sonic information surrounding us. Therefore, asking someone to listen intentionally is asking them to receive, to fully register the moment, and allow these sounds to be interpreted and integrated with their lived experience, as well as to provoke their imagination.

This is a practice. As we enhance our perception and attune ourselves through intentional listening, I believe we improve our capacity to learn, teach, and collaboratively engage ourselves through artistry and pedagogy.”

—Alex Shaw, *Musician and Teaching Artist*

Driving Continuous Improvement

Continuous improvement is about creating a culture where learning never stops—not just for the youth in your programs but for your entire organization. This approach recognizes that even the best programs can become more effective, more responsive, and more transformative when we remain curious, humble, and committed to growth.

There are numerous schools of thought about how to engage in continuous improvement. One widely used strategy is to approach it as an ongoing cycle—Plan → Do → Check → Act, or PDCA.



This simple model is highly adaptable and a practice that your program can regularly revisit. For example, in your arts learning program, you might:

Plan → *Decide to try a new artistic workshop*

Do → *Launch it and track how youth respond*

Check → *Review your data and outcomes*

Act → *Adjust accordingly for next time*

For arts learning programs serving systems-impacted youth, continuous improvement takes on special significance, ensuring that youth needs are met and that programs can adapt, evolve, and respond as needs change.

Practical Application: What Could PDCA Look Like in Action?

Imagine an arts learning program using the PDCA cycle to improve youth engagement:

- **PLAN:** Staff notice that attendance drops during the winter months. They hypothesize that offering warm meals before programming might improve attendance and engagement.
- **DO:** For two months, they partner with a local restaurant to provide hot soup and sandwiches before each session, tracking attendance and youth feedback.
- **CHECK:** Attendance increases by 40% during the trial period, and youth report feeling more energized and ready to participate. However, the cost is significant.
- **ACT:** They decide to continue offering food but switch to a more sustainable model, partnering with families and community members to provide homemade meals on a rotating basis, which also strengthens community connections.

Continuous improvement is not about perfection; it's about progress, learning, and evolving in ways that benefit everyone. By responding to the emerging needs of system-impacted youth, your program will “make the case” to continue vital work in communities across New Jersey.

Sharing Your Successes

Documenting and sharing your program's impact serves many important purposes: It helps you understand and improve your work, demonstrates accountability to funders and stakeholders, and provides inspiration and guidance to other programs serving similar populations. Most importantly, it honors the growth and achievements of the young people you serve.

Show-and-Tell

Think about hosting an art exhibit in your program space or partnering with a local library or community organization to temporarily install works by youth. Similarly, hosting a youth-led arts performance open to parents/guardians, partners, and the community is another compelling way to showcase your program.

Leverage Digital Platforms

Social media platforms are a budget-friendly way to highlight student achievement and connect with a broad audience. Depending on your medium, you may also be able to engage youth in content creation—think digital reels or photos—that share your program's unique story.

Collaborate

Actively engage program alumni, families, and community members in your arts learning program through volunteerism, and consider how youth can contribute to the community through art. A service project, such as a mural, garden mosaic, or public service announcement, can positively connect youth to the community and share your impact.

“Our students and teaching artists regularly bring free concerts and programs into hospitals, nursing homes, senior centers, centers for women and children, public libraries, food pantries, and even on street corners—creating moments of connection and dignity for those who are too often unseen or unheard. These programs are not just performances; they are opportunities for young artists to use their talents as instruments of empathy and change while discovering their own capacity to make a difference through art.”

—Helen H. Cha-Pyo, *Artistic Director & Principal Conductor*, Wharton Arts, Berkeley Heights, New Jersey

Profile: Sharing Your Impact—Artistic Noise



Impact reports⁶⁶ are powerful tools to share the results of your arts learning program. **Artistic Noise⁶⁷**, a Harlem-based nonprofit organization offering a variety of programming to meet the needs of system-impact young artists, develops an annual impact report to demonstrate their effectiveness. The report also recognizes funders and partners critical to their success.

Artistic Noise
2024 Impact Report

Continuous Improvement Essentials

Key Takeaways:

- You likely already have more valuable data than you realize—the key is identifying what information you have, understanding what it tells you, and using it strategically to improve your program.
- Focus on measuring your most important outcomes; prioritize the goals that are essential to achieving your program’s mission.
- The PDCA cycle (Plan-Do-Check-Act) provides a simple, adaptable framework for continuous improvement that can be regularly revisited in arts learning programs.

Quick Start Actions:

- Assess how well you’re currently measuring your most important program outcomes and identify one area for improvement.
- Implement simple observation tools or checklists to consistently track youth engagement.
- Try one small PDCA cycle this quarter. Identify something to test, implement it, review the results, and decide next steps.
- Create multiple ways for youth to share feedback: informal conversations, structured surveys, focus groups, or creative expression activities.

Key Questions for Reflection:

- What are your most important goals, and how are you measuring whether you’re achieving them?
- Do you have metrics for program quality, youth and staff satisfaction, attendance, engagement, and youth outcomes?
- How can you create psychological safety where staff, teaching artists, and youth feel comfortable sharing honest feedback?
- What do you notice in your current data that could inform program improvements?

Next Steps: After implementing continuous improvement practices using the PDCA cycle and strengthening your data collection, you’ll have compelling evidence of your program’s impact and clear strategies for ongoing enhancement. Use this foundation as you move into Chapter 6 to build sustainable funding and partnerships that support program quality and growth.



Chapter 6

Sustaining Your Program—Building for Long-Term Impact

What Do We Mean by Sustainability?

Now that you are implementing transformational arts learning programs, a critical question becomes: How do you sustain and grow this work over time? While sustainability is most often associated with funding, our view is considerably more expansive and includes several key strategies, all of which require strong, inspired leadership committed to lasting change.

Sustainability depends on interconnected elements that together strengthen your ability to maintain and grow your program's impact: quality programming, diversified funding, strategic partnerships, resource development, and community engagement and promotion. When these elements work together thoughtfully, they create a foundation that can weather challenges and continue serving systems-impacted youth effectively.

As we explored in Chapter 1, New Jersey's arts ecosystem provides tremendous opportunities for collaboration and resource-sharing. Connecting your work to these broader networks and funding streams will help ensure longevity and growth.

Quality As the Foundation of Sustainability

Quality is absolutely key to sustainability. Committing to the continuous improvement process we outlined in Chapter 5—using the PDCA cycle of design, implementation, reflection, and revision—establishes a positive culture and creates a clear path for enhancing the arts learning experience for the young people you serve. This commitment to quality becomes your strongest asset when seeking funding, building partnerships, and engaging community support. Quality programming supported by strong leadership creates a powerful foundation for sustainability because:

- **Funders invest in results**—Quality programs with documented outcomes attract and retain financial support.
- **Youth engagement drives retention**—Young people return to programs that truly serve their needs and interests.
- **Staff satisfaction improves retention**—Teaching artists want to work in excellent, well-supported programs.
- **Community recognition builds support**—Quality programs become community assets that stakeholders want to sustain.



Photo courtesy of
Institute of Music.
Photography: Tony Turner

The Art of Budgeting

Your budget is quite literally a numerical representation of your program vision and values. Your commitment to serving systems-impacted youth should be clearly evident in your line-item budget—from program development and facilities to staff compensation and youth support. Experienced funders can examine your budget and gauge your program’s quality largely based on how your expenses align with your program design and intended objectives.

It is essential that your budget reflects the resources, strategies, incentives, and supports necessary to adequately serve youth. Keep your ultimate goal in mind: It’s not just delivering a program; it’s engaging young people furthest from opportunity in dynamic arts experiences.

Essential Budget Considerations for Quality Programming

When developing a budget that truly reflects quality and sustainability, consider these critical questions:

- **Equipment and Technology**—Have you budgeted for relevant equipment that enables high-quality artmaking? Have you considered equipment as a capital investment that serves multiple program cycles? Do you have backup plans for equipment maintenance and replacement?
- **Materials and Supplies**—Have you budgeted for high-quality materials that enable youth to produce work they’re genuinely proud of? Are there sufficient materials for each participant, or will sharing limit individual expression? Have you included materials for culminating events and presentations?
- **Program Design and Duration**—Is the program duration and frequency sufficient to achieve youth impact? Are individual sessions long enough for deep engagement and skill-building? Does the program length allow youth to develop mastery and create portfolio-worthy work?
- **Facilities and Spaces**—Have you secured appropriate, inspiring spaces for regular programming? Have you budgeted for appropriate venues for culminating events and community showcases? Are facility costs realistic, and have you explored in-kind partnerships that should be reflected as budget value? Do you have the proper liability insurance?
- **Staff and Teaching Artists**—What are the qualifications of your teaching artists, and are you offering competitive compensation? Are teaching artists compensated for lesson planning, preparation time, and professional development? Have you budgeted for additional support staff with the expertise to meet unforeseen needs of participants? Are you able to offer sustained employment and benefits that support staff retention? Consider using the [Teaching Artist Pay Rate Calculator](#)⁶⁸ when setting your teaching artist fee.
- **Professional Development and Coaching**—What ongoing training will staff receive to effectively serve your specific youth population? Have you identified quality professional development providers within New Jersey’s arts and youth development ecosystem? Are you investing in training approaches that build internal capacity? Have you budgeted for coaching, mentoring, and regular program observation?

- **Culminating Events and Community Engagement**—Have you planned and budgeted for high-quality showcases that honor youth work? Are promotion and marketing costs included to ensure engaged audiences? Have you considered documentation costs for sharing impact and attracting future support?
- **Youth-Centered Supports and Incentives**—Based on your specific population’s needs, what additional supports are necessary for sustained participation? Have you budgeted for transportation, childcare, meals, or other practical barriers? Are there incentives, stipends, or pathway opportunities that recognize youth investment?

Identifying Opportunities for Funding

Using your budget, you can begin looking for grants and other resources to fund your arts learning program. A grant is a form of financial assistance that does not need to be repaid. Grants are often awarded to support specific projects, activities, and goals, usually in a competitive process. Following are potential sources of funding for arts learning programs in New Jersey and beyond.

Government/Public Sector Funding

- Local
 - Local municipal arts councils and cultural affairs departments
 - [County Arts Agencies](#)⁶⁹
- State
 - [New Jersey State Council on the Arts](#)⁷⁰
 - [New Jersey Grants Management Office](#)⁷¹
- Federal
 - [National Endowment for the Arts](#)⁷²
 - [Department of Justice](#)⁷³
 - [Department of Health and Human Services](#)⁷⁴
 - [Housing and Urban Development](#)⁷⁵
 - [Department of Labor](#)⁷⁶
 - [Department of Education](#)⁷⁷



Mural by The Armory Center for the Arts inside Barry J. Nidorf Juvenile Hall. Photography: Maira Rios

Foundation Support

- National foundations focused on youth development and arts learning
- Regional foundations with New Jersey focus areas
- Local community foundations and family foundations
- Corporate foundations, especially those with community investment priorities

Private Sector/Corporate Sponsorship

- Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) departments focused on corporate giving in communities in which customers live and work
- Corporate sponsorship and naming opportunities that provide businesses with brand exposure for supporting aligned causes
- Corporate volunteerism which lends employees to support nonprofits through volunteer hours
- Corporate donations—non-monetary donations of products and services, or employee financial donations and matching gifts made on behalf of the company

Earned Revenue Opportunities

- Fee-for-service contracts with schools, community organizations, or juvenile justice facilities
- Professional development and training services for other organizations
- Artwork sales, performances, or exhibitions that generate revenue
- Consultation services based on your expertise
- Community wealth enterprise-sales and commissions for youth art and services that generate revenue for the program and revenue for participants

Community and Individual Support

- Individual donor cultivation and stewardship
- Community fundraising events and campaigns
- Crowdfunding for specific projects or equipment needs
- In-kind support from local businesses and community partners

Strategic Funding Approaches

- **Diversify.** Be intentional in seeking diverse funding sources; try to secure support from multiple funding sources. This is especially important during rapidly changing funding environments.
- **Align with funder priorities.** Research funders thoroughly and understand how your work connects to their specific goals and geographic focus areas.
- **Tell compelling stories.** Use the outcome data and youth stories you've collected to demonstrate real impact and community need.
- **Build relationships.** Funding is often about relationships. Invest time in getting to know funders and their priorities.
- **Plan ahead.** Many funders operate on annual cycles, and some funding opportunities only open once every two or three years. Plan your applications well in advance and track important deadlines.
- **Share success.** Keep funders informed about your impact and challenges. They often become your strongest advocates for future funding.



Photo by Iftikhar Alam
from Creative Market.

Leveraging New Jersey's Arts Ecosystem

As we explored in Chapter 1, New Jersey's arts ecosystem is remarkably strong, providing countless opportunities for meaningful partnership. Strategic collaboration within this ecosystem can:

- **Expand resources and reduce costs:** Partner with organizations that have complementary strengths and assets.
- **Grow reach and impact:** Connect with partners who serve similar populations or have different access points.
- **Build political and community support:** Align with established organizations that have strong community relationships.
- **Provide professional development:** Access training and expertise through partnership rather than purchasing independently.

Partnerships should be proactive, intentional, and focused on achieving specific, common goals that benefit the young people you serve. Like any relationship, there are varying levels of engagement that reflect the intensity of the partnership.

Types of Strategic Partnerships

Arts Organizations and Cultural Institutions

- Museums, theatres, and performance venues for showcases and field trips
- Professional arts organizations for mentorship and career exposure
- Other community arts programs for resource sharing and joint programming

Youth-Serving Organizations

- Schools and afterschool programs for recruitment and coordination
- Community centers and recreation programs for facility sharing
- Mentorship programs and youth development organizations for holistic support

Systems Partners

- Youth justice facilities and programs for direct access to target populations
- Social services agencies for wraparound support and referrals
- Mental health and healing-centered care providers for specialized expertise

Community Assets

- Local businesses for funding, in-kind support, and career connections
- Faith communities and neighborhood organizations for outreach and trust-building
- Higher education institutions for student volunteers and research partnerships

Strategic partnerships can provide resources that extend far beyond financial support, such as:

- **Facility partnerships:** Access to high-quality spaces for programming and events
- **Equipment sharing:** Expensive technology and tools through collaborative agreements
- **Expertise exchange:** Professional development and consultation through peer networks
- **Volunteer engagement:** Skilled volunteers for specialized support and mentoring
- **Community connections:** Access to networks and relationships that expand opportunities for youth

Community Engagement and Promotion

Sustainable programs are deeply embedded in their communities and recognized as valuable assets. It's impossible to think about sustainability without considering stakeholder and community engagement. Just as we discussed diversifying funding sources, that same principle applies to stakeholder and community engagement. Imagine you lose your largest funder or benefactor. Who are the voices that would advocate on behalf of your program and the systems-impacted youth you serve? If your answer is only your staff and program participants, you need to widen your outreach and engage a diverse range of stakeholders.

Think about your community—families, community leaders, businesses, influencers, funders, mayor/city council members, artists, educators, pastors, congress members, elders, etc. Invite them to final exhibitions and performances. Keep them informed about the exciting work your youth artists are putting out into the world. Shine a light on their gifts and increase the public's awareness of their value and contributions. Who are the stakeholders and what are the opportunities to engage them throughout your program?

Community engagement strategies can range from marketing and promotion to public exhibitions and performances, volunteer opportunities, press coverage, and participation in community festivals and events. Be present, be innovative, be seen.

Building Community Recognition

- **Document and share impact.** Regularly communicate about youth achievements, program outcomes, and community benefits through multiple channels.
- **Engage authentic voices.** Center youth voices and stories in your community engagement, allowing young people to speak for themselves about program impact.
- **Connect to community priorities.** Demonstrate how your program addresses broader community concerns like youth development, economic opportunity, and cultural vitality.
- **Celebrate publicly.** Use culminating events, social media, and community presentations to showcase youth work and program quality.

Sustaining Your Program for Years to Come

Remember that sustainability is not a destination—it’s an ongoing process that requires the same continuous improvement mindset you apply to program quality. The systems-impacted youth you serve deserve programs that will be there for them consistently over time, and your commitment to building sustainable, excellent programming ensures that transformative arts learning opportunities will continue to change lives across New Jersey for years to come.

Profile: Sustainability—The Institute of Music for Children

Sustaining youth arts programs and youth-serving arts organizations requires leadership, innovation, fortitude, and a future-facing long-term strategy. New Jersey has many great examples of sustainability, and we’ve chosen to highlight [The Institute of Music for Children](#)⁷⁸ (the Institute) in Elizabeth for their leadership, breadth of strategies, deep connection to community, and commitment to serving youth furthest from opportunity.

Overview: The Institute, guided by its vision of *HARMONY* (Helping Achieve Responsible, Motivated, Optimistic Neighborhood Youth), builds a community of high-achieving citizens who are arts lovers and arts makers through professional instruction, mentorship, and family engagement. Providing over 1,000 youth with high-quality arts programming each year, the Institute serves as a beacon of hope and possibility in Elizabeth, New Jersey.

Housed in a donated church, the Institute’s programs connect with schools, youth, families, and social service agencies. The Institute is an integral part of the community and cultivates decades-long relationships to meet the needs of the city’s most underserved residents through the arts. Staff are well-trained in the arts, positive youth development, social-emotional learning, and cross-system navigation.

Systems-Impacted Youth: The Institute’s community outreach programming specifically targets the most vulnerable young people in Elizabeth and surrounding areas, providing not just arts instruction but wraparound support through strategic partnerships. Staff are trained to understand trauma’s impact on learning and use arts as a vehicle for healing and community connection. Their outreach partners include:

- NJ Youth Justice Commission (justice-impacted youth)
- Union County Division of Youth Services (at-risk youth)
- Restore Ministries (immigrant and low-income teens)
- Elizabeth Coalition to House the Homeless (displaced youth and those in transitional housing)
- YWCA of Eastern Union County (youth impacted by domestic violence)

Connected Arts Learning in Action: The Institute exemplifies all elements of the Connected Arts Learning framework discussed in Chapter 4.

- Interests and identity: Programming reflects the authentic cultural backgrounds of Elizabeth’s immigrant families while providing space for youth to explore their individual artistic voices and cultural pride.
- Relationships: Deep investment in family engagement and community partnerships creates a true network of support that extends far beyond program hours, providing consistency and belonging.
- Opportunities: Tiered engagement creates real pathways to leadership and employment, while community partnerships connect youth to resources, mentorship, and post-secondary opportunities.

Impact and Recognition: The Institute’s networked approach has created measurable community impact:

- Over 85% annual youth retention rate
- Strong family engagement across cultural and linguistic communities
- Recognition as a community anchor supporting the city’s most vulnerable populations
- Successful facility expansion reflecting community investment and growth

Programming Highlights:

- Culturally responsive programming that reflects Elizabeth’s diverse immigrant communities and their traditions, languages, and cultural heritage
- Tiered engagement opportunities providing sustainable pathways for youth involvement promoting growth and economic opportunity
- Intentional family engagement through showcases, parent workshops, bilingual programs, and home visits to create strong family partnerships
- Community network building, cultivating relationships, partnerships, and collaborations across the arts learning ecosystem at state, regional, and local levels to expand learning opportunities and access

Sustainability Approach: The Institute has inspired leadership with the expertise, arts knowledge, commitment to quality, and contacts across the state to forge innovative strategic partnerships and cross-sector collaborations. Secondly, the organization has a keen focus on quality, hiring and retaining professional teaching artists and designing intentional programming. At its core, the Institute is about holistically supporting the most vulnerable members of the community through the arts.

With engaged stakeholders, supportive leadership, and high-quality programming that yields results, the Institute has built a foundation for long-term sustainability.

Sustainability does not happen spontaneously—it requires vision, investing in people and relationships, putting one foot in front of the other, and staying committed over time.

Sustainability Essentials

Key Takeaways:

- Sustainability encompasses much more than funding—it requires quality programming, strategic partnerships, community engagement, and diversified resource development working together.
- Your budget is a numerical representation of your program vision and values; it should clearly reflect the resources needed to serve systems-impacted youth effectively.
- Strategic partnerships within New Jersey’s robust arts ecosystem can expand resources and impact, build community support, and provide professional development opportunities.
- Building diversified funding streams reduces risk and provides stability; successful programs don’t rely on a single funding source but develop multiple revenue opportunities.

Quick Start Actions:

- Assess your current budget to ensure it accurately represents your commitment to quality programming and serving systems-impacted youth.
- Research and apply to one new funding source that aligns with your program.
- Document one compelling program success story that demonstrates impact and share broadly within your community.
- Explore one innovation or earned revenue opportunity that could support sustainability while advancing your mission.

Key Questions for Reflection:

- Does your budget reflect the resources, strategies, and supports necessary to success fully engage systems-impacted youth?
- What strategic partnerships could help you share resources, expand reach, and build stronger community support for your program?
- How are you communicating your program’s impact and value to potential funders, partners, and community stakeholders?
- What opportunities exist in your community to generate earned revenue while providing real-world experience for youth?
- How can you build deeper community recognition of your program as a valuable asset worth sustaining over time?

Next Steps: Use these sustainability practices to ensure that transformative arts learning opportunities continue to serve systems-impacted youth across New Jersey for years to come.

Conclusion: A Call to Action and Commitment

The research is clear, and the evidence is compelling: Arts learning transforms lives. For systems-impacted youth who face systemic barriers, high-quality arts programs offer safe environments to heal, build community, discover their voices, and envision hopeful futures. These programs do far more than teach artistic skills—they strengthen emotional well-being, build essential social competencies, create pathways to education and employment, and cultivate the resilience young people need to thrive. Across New Jersey, we have the privilege and responsibility to ensure that every young person, particularly those furthest from opportunity, has access to transformative arts experiences. This responsibility is shared by all of us—teaching artists, program leaders, funders, policymakers, community partners, and advocates. When we commit to serving systems-impacted youth, we invest in the future of our communities and our state.

This guide was developed to strengthen the capacity of New Jersey’s arts learning sector to effectively serve systems-impacted youth through best practices, research-backed frameworks, and practical guidance. Our hope is that you will use this resource to design and implement engaging, sustainable programs; form strong cross-sector partnerships to ensure youth needs are met; and practice continuous improvement through data collection and reflection.

We extend our deepest gratitude and recognition to the teaching artists, program leaders, and organizations across New Jersey who are already doing this vital work with passion, dedication, and innovation. You are meeting young people where they are, creating spaces of healing and possibility, and demonstrating what’s achievable when we center youth needs and honor their potential. We acknowledge that we have more to learn about how to offer effective programs, and that the field continues to evolve as we deepen our understanding of healing-centered practice, culturally responsive pedagogy, and youth development. Together, we can build a future where

the arts are not just
an opportunity for some,
but a fundamental
right for all.

Endnotes

1. Assembly Bill 4500, 218th Leg., Reg. Sess. (N.J. 2019). https://www.njleg.state.nj.us/bill-search/2018/A4500/bill-text?f=PL19&n=115_
2. Farnum, M., & Schaffer, R. (1998). *YouthARTS handbook: arts programs for youth at risk*. Americans for the Arts [PDF]. <https://youtharts.artsusa.org/pdf/youtharts.pdf>
3. New Jersey State Council on the Arts. (n.d.). *New Jersey State Council on the Arts*. <https://nj.gov/state/njsca>
4. New Jersey Office of the Attorney General. (n.d.). *Youth Justice Commission*. <https://www.njoag.gov/about/divisions-and-offices/youth-justice-commission-home>
5. The Learning Agenda. (n.d.). *The Learning Agenda*. <https://agenda4learning.com>
6. Development Services Group, Inc. (2016). *Arts-based programs and arts therapies for at-risk, justice-involved, and traumatized youths* (Literature review). Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. <https://www.ojjdp.gov/mpg/litreviews/Arts-Based-Programs-for-Youth.pdf>
7. New Jersey Education Association. (n.d.). *Good news about NJ public schools*. <https://www.njea.org/goodnews>
8. Birrell, L., Barrett, E., Oliver, E., Nguyen, A., Ewing, R., Anderson, M., & Teesson, M. (2024). The impact of arts-inclusive programs on young children’s mental health and wellbeing: A rapid review. *Arts & Health, 17*(3), 185–207. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17533015.2024.2319032>
9. Morizio, L. J., Cook, A. L., Troeger, R., & Whitehouse, A. (2022). Creating compassion: Using art for empathy learning with urban youth. *Contemporary School Psychology, 26*(4), 435–447. [https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC7808116/#:~:text=Studies%20suggest%20that%20arts-based,learning%20\(Kozol%2C%202005\)](https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC7808116/#:~:text=Studies%20suggest%20that%20arts-based,learning%20(Kozol%2C%202005))
10. Walton, C. W. (2020). “It just made me want to do better for myself”: Performing arts education and academic performance for African American male high school students. *International Journal of Education & the Arts, 21*(13). <https://doi.org/10.26209/ijea21n13>
11. Zarobe, L., & Bungay, H. (2017). The role of arts activities in developing resilience and mental wellbeing in children and young people: A rapid review of the literature. *Perspectives in Public Health, 137*(6), 337–347. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/28613107>
12. Catterall, J. S., Dumais, S. A., & Hampden-Thompson, G. (2012). *The arts and achievement in at-risk youth: Findings from four longitudinal studies* (Research Report No. 55). National Endowment for the Arts. <https://www.arts.gov/sites/default/files/Arts-At-Risk-Youth.pdf>
13. Vandell, D. L., & Simpkins, S. D. (2024). Organized after-school activities as a developmental context for children and adolescents. In J. J. Lockman (Ed.), *Advances in Child Development and Behavior* (Vol. 67, pp. 1-30). Academic Press. <https://doi.org/10.1016/bs.acdb.2024.07.005>
14. Development Services Group, Inc. (2016). *Arts-based programs and arts therapies for at-risk, justice-involved, and traumatized youths: Literature review*. Washington, DC: Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. <https://ojjdp.ojp.gov/mpg/literature-review/arts-based-programs-for-youth.pdf>
15. Arts Education Partnership. (n.d.). *Arts Education Partnership*. <https://www.aep-arts.org>
16. Advocates for Children of New Jersey. (n.d.). *Advocates for Children of New Jersey*. <https://acnj.org>
17. Advocates for Children of New Jersey. (2025, April 22). *New Jersey Kids Count county pocket guide 2025*. <https://acnj.org/new-jersey-kids-count-county-pocket-guide-2025>

18. People & Stories / Gente y Cuentos. (n.d.). *People & Stories / Gente y Cuentos*. <https://www.peopleandstories.org>
19. The Poetry Center at Passaic County Community College. (n.d.). *The Poetry Center at Passaic County Community College*. <https://www.poetrycenterpccc.com>
20. Keys 2 Success. (n.d.). *Keys 2 Success*. <https://www.keysnewark.com>
21. James R. Halsey Foundation of the Arts (n.d.) *James R. Halsey Foundation of the Arts*. <https://www.jrhfoundation.org>
22. Arts Ed NJ. (n.d.). *Interactive data dashboard*. <https://artsednj.org/research-resources/interactive-data-dashboard>
23. New Jersey State Council on the Arts. (n.d.). *Grants*. <https://www.nj.gov/state/njsca/grant-programs.shtml>
24. Arts Ed NJ. (n.d.). *Arts Ed NJ*. <https://artsednj.org>
25. ArtPride New Jersey. (n.d.). *ArtPride New Jersey*. <https://www.artpridenj.org>
26. New Jersey State Council on the Arts. (2025, July 17). *Local arts program contact information*. <https://www.nj.gov/state/njsca/assets/pdf/local-arts-program-contact-information.pdf>
27. Dance New Jersey. (n.d.). *Dance New Jersey*. <https://www.dancenewjersey.org>
28. Mid Atlantic Arts. (n.d.). *Mid Atlantic Arts*. <https://www.midatlanticarts.org>
29. New Jersey Association of Museums. (n.d.). *New Jersey Association of Museums*. <https://njmuseums.wildapricot.org>
30. New Jersey Theatre Alliance. (n.d.). *New Jersey Theatre Alliance*. <https://njtheatrealliance.org>
31. Newark Arts. (n.d.). *Newark Arts*. <https://www.newarkarts.org>
32. New Jersey State Council on the Arts. (n.d.). *New Jersey State Council on the Arts*. <https://www.nj.gov/state/njsca>
33. South Jersey Cultural Alliance. (n.d.). *South Jersey Cultural Alliance*. <https://www.sjca.net>
34. Search Institute. (n.d.). *Developmental Assets®*. <https://searchinstitute.org/developmental-assets>
35. Montgomery, D., Rogovin, P., & Persaud, N. (2013). *Something to say: Success principles for after-school arts programs from urban youth and other experts*. The Wallace Foundation. https://wallacefoundation.org/sites/default/files/2024-08/something-to-say-success-principles-for-afterschool-arts-programs_doi_10.59656%252FA-YA1597.001_0.pdf
36. NOMADstudio. (n.d.). *NOMADstudio*. <https://nomadstudio.org>
37. Montgomery, D., Rogovin, P., & Persaud, N. (2013). *Something to say: Success principles for afterschool arts programs from urban youth and other experts*. The Wallace Foundation. <https://wallacefoundation.org/report/something-say-success-principles-afterschool-arts-programs-urban-youth-and-other-experts#visualizations>
38. Washington State Arts Commission. (2022, July 18). *What is a teaching artist*. [Video]. YouTube. [youtube.com/watch?si=yNZTB6JzQjG0bVQv&v=zgMaioJdt9k&feature=youtu.be](https://www.youtube.com/watch?si=yNZTB6JzQjG0bVQv&v=zgMaioJdt9k&feature=youtu.be)
39. Arts Ed Newark. (n.d.). *Healing-centered engagement*. <https://www.artsednewark.org/healing>
40. Arts Ed NJ. (n.d.). *VPA learning standards*. <https://artsednj.org/professional-learning/vpa-learning-standards>
41. Correctional Education Association Region 1. (n.d.). *Correctional Education Association Region 1*. <https://wp.cearegion1.org>

42. Correctional Education Association. (n.d.) *CEA National*. <https://ceanational.org>
43. Correctional Education Association. (n.d.) *Professional development*. <https://ceanational.org/professional-development>
44. National Guild for Community Arts Education. (n.d.). *Resources*. <https://nationalguild.org/resources>
45. New Jersey State Council on the Arts. (2025). *Opportunities for the field*. <https://www.nj.gov/state/njsca/announcements-opportunities.shtml>
46. Rutgers University–Newark School of Arts and Sciences. (n.d.). *NJPAC teaching artist certificate*. <https://sasn.rutgers.edu/njpac-teaching-artist-certificate>
47. NJSACC. (n.d.) *Professional development*. <https://www.njsacc.org/professional-development>
48. Arts Ed Newark. (n.d.). *Healing-centered engagement*. <https://www.artsednewark.org/healing>
49. Stockton Rush Bartol Foundation. (n.d.). *Certification courses*. <https://bartol.org/certification-courses>
50. Arts Education Partnership (2021, October 14). *A model for trauma-informed and healing-centered practice through the arts*. <https://www.aep-arts.org/multimedia-resources/a-model-for-trauma-informed-and-healing-centered-practice-through-the-arts>
51. Arts Ed NJ. (2021, June 17). *CRAE workout*. <https://artsednj.org/craeworkout>
52. Express Newark (n.d.). *Express Newark*. <https://expressnewark.org>
53. New Jersey Department of Education. (n.d.). *New Jersey student learning standards*. <https://www.nj.gov/education/standards/vpa>
54. The Center for Arts Education and Social Emotional Learning. (n.d.). *Arts education and social emotional learning framework*. <https://selarts.org>
55. Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. (n.d.). *AileyCamp*. <https://ailey.org/community/aileycamp>
56. Appel Farm Arts & Music Center. (n.d.). *Appel Farm Arts & Music Center*. <https://appelfarm.org>
57. coLAB Arts. (n.d.). *coLAB Arts*. <https://colab-arts.org>
58. coLAB Arts (n.d.). *#150YearsIsEnough*. <https://colab-arts.org/150yearsisenough>
59. Pepler, K., Dahn, M., & Ito, M. (2023). *The Connected Arts Learning Framework: An expanded view of the purposes and possibilities for arts learning*. The Wallace Foundation. https://wallacefoundation.org/sites/default/files/2024-08/the-connected-arts-learning-framework.doi_10.3102%252F0091732X221084322.pdf
60. Battelle for Kids. (2019). *Framework for 21st century learning*. https://www.battelleforkids.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/P21_Framework_Brief.pdf
61. Erik James Montgomery Foundation. (n.d.). *EJM Foundation*. <https://www.ejmfoundation.org>
62. New Jersey Department of Education. (n.d.). *New Jersey student learning standards*. <https://www.nj.gov/education/standards/vpa>
63. Forum for Youth Investment. (n.d.). *The YPQI approach*. <https://forumfyi.org/weikartcenter/ypqi>

64. National Institute on Out-of-School Time. (n.d.). *SAYO-Y: Survey of academic and youth outcomes-youth survey*. <https://www.niost.org/Training-Descriptions/survey-of-afterschool-youth-outcomes-youth-survey-sayo-y>
65. National Institute on Out-of-School Time. (n.d.). *National Institute on Out-of-School Time*. <https://www.niost.org>
66. Artistic Noise. (n.d.). *Impact report*. <https://www.artisticnoise.org/impact-report>
67. Artistic Noise. (n.d.). *Artistic Noise*. <https://www.artisticnoise.org>
68. Teaching Artists Guild. (n.d.). *Pay rate calculator*. <https://teachingartists.com/pay-rate-calculator>
69. New Jersey State Council on the Arts. (2025, July 17). *Local arts program contact information*. <https://www.nj.gov/state/njsca/assets/pdf/local-arts-program-contact-information.pdf>
70. New Jersey State Council on the Arts. (n.d.). *Grants*. <https://nj.gov/state/njsca/grant-programs.shtml>
71. New Jersey Department of the Treasury. (n.d.). *State grants*. <https://www.nj.gov/treasury/grants-management/opportunities/state>
72. National Endowment for the Arts. (n.d.). *Grants*. <https://www.arts.gov/grants>
73. U.S. Department of Justice. (n.d.). *Grants*. <https://www.justice.gov/grants>
74. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (n.d.). *Grants & contracts*. <https://www.hhs.gov/grants-contracts/index.html>
75. U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. (n.d.). *Grants*. <https://www.hud.gov/hud-partners#Grants>
76. U.S. Department of Labor. (n.d.). *Grants*. <https://www.dol.gov/grants>
77. U.S. Department of Education (n.d.). *Grants and programs*. <https://www.ed.gov/grants-and-programs>
78. The Institute of Music for Children (n.d.). *The Institute of Music for Children*. <https://www.instituteofmusic.org>



The New Jersey State Council on the Arts,
created in 1966, is a division of the NJ Department of State
and a partner agency of the National Endowment for the Arts.