

ACTIONABLE STRATEGIES FOR HIGH-QUALITY OUT-OF-SCHOOL TIME ARTS PROGRAMS

Principle 2: Executive Commitment

Leading for Quality: Implementing Leadership Commitment



Overview

Multipurpose out-of-school time (OST) organizations are complex environments that manage a diverse portfolio of activities to attract a wide range of young people. While leaders strive to offer variety, they naturally lean toward the core programs for which their organizations are best known, such as athletics, academic support, or leadership development. Without intentional focus, arts programs often default to “arts and crafts” activities rather than true art skill development.

To increase the quality of these programs and meaningfully engage youth who are interested in the arts, an organization needs more than just a talented teaching artist or a new curriculum. It requires commitment from leadership.

This is the essence of **Principle 2: Leaders have a public commitment to high-quality arts programs that is supported by sustained action.**

According to [research from the Youth Arts Initiative \(YAI\)](#), funded by The Wallace Foundation, leadership requires a multi-tiered network of champions advocating internally and externally for the arts.

About the Youth Arts Initiative

The Youth Arts Initiative (YAI), which took place between 2012-2022 and was funded by The Wallace Foundation, aimed to address the gap in access to high-quality arts by developing a sustainable and scalable model of arts programming in multipurpose OST organizations. YAI was developed by the Boys & Girls Clubs of America—an OST provider that offers community-based low-cost multipurpose OST programs in under-resourced communities that have been economically and socially marginalized. YAI is based on the [10 Success Principles for High-Quality OST Arts Programs](#) derived from community arts organizations, youth participants, and youth development experts.

Why Leadership is Essential for High-Quality Arts Programs

Leadership support is the engine that drives quality. This support transforms a multipurpose OST organization's arts program from a place where arts are a pastime into an environment where true skill-building can thrive. Leadership commitment to the arts:

→ REQUIRES INVESTMENT

High-quality arts programs require investments to facilitate skill-building (e.g., teaching artists), securing appropriate space, and providing equipment, materials, and technology. Yet, **these investments** are in tension with the open-door, low-cost, high-capacity operating model of typical multipurpose OST organizations. Strong leadership advocating for the importance of the arts can help authorize and defend these critical investments.

→ VALIDATES THE IMPORTANCE OF THE ARTS

When organizational leaders show up—whether at a ribbon-cutting for a new studio or a mid-year showcase—they send a powerful message to youth. **Visible leadership** support signals to youth that their creative work is meaningful and that they matter. This support signals that the arts are core to the organization's mission, rather than a sideline hobby.

→ HELPS NAVIGATE INTERNAL TENSIONS

Introducing additional resources into a program for youth with specific interests can create friction. Staff in other program areas may question why the arts program is receiving special equipment or why arts staff have different schedules. Leaders can manage these internal dynamics and articulate the value of the arts to the broader team.

Core Challenges for Multipurpose OST Organizations

Implementing Principle 2 is not as simple as issuing a mandate. Instead, leaders must navigate certain structural challenges:

BANDWIDTH

Executive directors excel at managing complex organizations with diverse funding streams, but due to the mission of multipurpose OST organizations, they cannot focus exclusively on the arts.

INCLUSIVITY

In multi-site organizations, site managers are the most powerful change agents. Even with executive director support, **efforts to raise the quality of arts programming** struggled if the local site manager did not support the necessary logistical changes (e.g., altering schedules, protecting studio space from other uses, or supporting the teaching artist).

RESOURCES

High-quality arts programs are designed for deep skill-building, which often means they benefit from lower staff-to-youth ratios and specialized materials, equipment, and technology. These inequities can lead to organizational questions about and pushback against the arts.

Practical Strategies for Multipurpose OST Organizations

How can multipurpose OST organizations build a sustainable ecosystem of support? Research from the YAI pilot offers three practical strategies for cultivating commitment.



BUILD A MULTI-TIERED LEADERSHIP TEAM

Commitment cannot live at the executive director level alone. Successful YAI sites established a “chain of champions” that included the executive director, the operations leaders, development staff, and, crucially, site managers. When site managers feel ownership of the program, such as helping to hire artists and design spaces, they can become its fiercest defenders and supporters. Additionally, since professional teaching artists often work part time, multipurpose OST organizations should identify a dedicated supervisor (e.g., an “arts liaison”) who understands their specific needs and can advocate for them and arts programs at the administrative level.



ENGAGE IN “INTERNAL ADVOCACY”

Leaders must explain why the arts program operates differently. They should articulate how high-quality arts are not “extra,” but a powerful vehicle for achieving the organization’s core youth development goals (such as retention, social-emotional learning, and safety). Leaders also need to manage expectations, explicitly addressing staff concerns about resource allocation and explaining that investing in arts will help them learn more about improving quality across all programs.



MAKE SUPPORT VISIBLE

Sustained action from leaders means showing up, such as attending events. For instance, when a leader attends a culminating event, it validates the hard work of the youth and the teaching artist. Teaching artists can help the executive director by cultivating their involvement—inviting them to events, creating artwork for them, or extending an offer to sit in on a class. Leaders should also communicate internally and externally about the importance of the arts, such as by showcasing successes and highlighting the program in organizational newsletters, board meetings, and social media. These communications create “buzz” that reinforces the program’s value to the board, funders, and community.

The Bottom Line

Increasing the quality of arts programming does not happen by accident. It requires leaders who disrupt the status quo, gather and defend the necessary resources, and champion the value of creative expression. When leaders commit to the arts, they do more than approve a budget; they build an environment where youth feel seen, valued, and supported in their journey.

The 10 Principles for High-Quality Arts Programs

Research funded/supported by The Wallace Foundation codified key practices for high-quality arts programs into [10 Success Principles](#) for high-quality arts programs, developed in partnership with community arts organizations, youth participants, and youth development experts.

1 PROFESSIONAL ARTISTS AS INSTRUCTORS

Programs are led by practicing artists, compensated fairly, and supported in their professional growth.

2 EXECUTIVE COMMITMENT

Leaders make a public, sustained commitment to high-quality arts programming.

3 DEDICATED, INSPIRING SPACES

Arts programs take place in welcoming environments that affirm the value of art and artists.

4 CULTURE OF HIGH EXPECTATIONS

Programs respect creative expression and affirm youth participants as artists.

5 CULMINATING EVENTS

Programs conclude with high-quality showcases for real audiences.

6 POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS

Adult mentors and peers foster belonging and acceptance.

7 YOUTH VOICE AND LEADERSHIP

Participants actively shape programs and take on meaningful leadership roles.

8 HANDS-ON SKILL BUILDING

Programs emphasize skill development using current equipment and technology.

9 STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

Programs build networks of support for youth and the arts.

10 SAFE SPACES

Programs provide physically and emotionally safe environments.

Learn More!



ACCESS OUR MINI-BRIEF SERIES

RFA and MAI have authored a series of mini-briefs for each principle, drawing from our research with the Youth Arts Initiative (YAI). We have also published several reports from YAI. You can find the mini-briefs and reports [here](#).



JOIN AN OPEN HOUSE CONVERSATION

RFA and MAI will host Open House conversations for organizations and individuals that would like to learn more about incorporating practical lessons from YAI into their programs. We anticipate conducting the Open Houses in **fall 2026**. Stay tuned for more information!



SET UP TIME TO CHAT

If you have any questions about the content of this brief, or if you would like to share your experience in **funding, building, and sustaining** youth arts programming, we invite you to reach out to RFA and MAI. The authors, **Tracey Hartmann** and **Wendy McClanahan**, can be reached at thartmann@researchforaction.org and wmclanahan@maieval.com.



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