

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

Principle 3: Dedicated, Inspiring Spaces

Messaging that Art Matters: How Multipurpose OST Organizations Can Create Affirming Art Spaces



Overview

In our series on how multipurpose out-of-school time (OST) organizations can increase the quality of their arts programs, we now address one of the most visible and common challenges: **space**.

We all know the reality: the gym doubles as the theater, the cafeteria as the visual arts room, and dedicated storage is non-existent. These realities highlight the inherent tension between the multipurpose OST environment and **Principle 3: Arts programs take place in dedicated, inspiring, and welcoming spaces, and affirm the value of art and artists.**

So, how does a multipurpose OST organization address this tension? **Research from the Youth Arts Initiative (YAI)** shows it is possible and that getting creative with space is a “transformative” step.

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 Space is Important for Arts Programs

In the original YAI pilot, where multipurpose OST organizations created dedicated art studios, achieving the aims of Principle 3 required the biggest culture **shift**—particularly since dedicating space is often one of the biggest hurdles for a multipurpose OST organization. Leaders constantly juggle shared rooms, limited resources, and work to meet multiple youth interests.

But the YAI research showed exactly why this effort is so critical: **because space sends a message by:**

→ FACILITATING SKILL DEVELOPMENT

Specialized art spaces provide the necessary room for technical instruction—such as allowing paintings to dry or dancers to move safely on appropriate flooring—which is essential for mastering specific artistic crafts.

→ COMMUNICATING THAT YAI WAS DIFFERENT

Carving out dedicated art studios—even small ones—sent a visible signal to youth, staff, parents, and the community that **arts and artists were valued**. These studios were the most obvious sign that this program was different from the drop-in arts-and-crafts of the past.

→ ATTRACTING YOUTH

In the YAI **research**, the new art spaces and professional equipment were, after staff, the most commonly cited reasons youth were attracted to the program and considered it as a high-quality experience.

More recent research gives us a powerful language for this: a well-designed space is the first step in creating an “**Artful Sanctuary**” — a place designed to foster physical and emotional safety, a haven from the hustle and bustle of the OST program where youth believe their creative work is protected and valued. When you dedicate space, you’re telling youth that they, and their art, matter.

Core Challenges for Multipurpose OST Organizations

The YAI research found that dedicating space is a central operational challenge for multipurpose OST organizations. This isn't a flaw; it's the reality of a multipurpose environment. The research highlighted three practical challenges to navigate:

BALANCING PROGRAM AND STAFF NEEDS

In a busy center, repurposing a shared space for a dedicated art studio means other programs and staff must be relocated. These relocations require careful planning and communication to manage the understandable frustration of staff who may lose their space.

A “MAXIMIZE EVERY INCH OF SPACE” CULTURE

Most multipurpose OST organizations operate with a mindset of maximizing every square inch of space for youth. The idea of a room going unused when arts programming wasn't in session runs counter to this core operational value.

THE DAILY LOGISTICS OF SHARING

When spaces *are* shared, teaching artists spend valuable time setting up and breaking down. Projects can't be left out to dry, equipment is at risk, and the “wow” factor of a dedicated room is lost.

Practical Strategies for Multipurpose OST Organizations

Later phases of YAI [research](#) documented that organizations landed on three realistic, sustainable solutions.



THE HUB MODEL

One approach is to invest heavily in 1-2 high-quality, dedicated studio spaces in your network of sites (a “hub”) to provide a truly professional-grade experience (e.g., a full dance studio with sprung floors or a digital lab) without replicating those costs at every site.



THE PARTNER MODEL

Another solution is to use high-quality spaces that already exist in your community. YAI sites successfully partnered with local schools or community arts organizations to use their visual arts rooms, dance studios, or theaters after hours.



DO A MINI-MAKEOVER

This is the most adaptable and common approach found in the research: making minor but meaningful modifications with youth and artists to existing multipurpose spaces. YAI created [aspects of an "Artful Sanctuary"](#) without dedicating space or new construction. They painted the space, displayed artwork, branded the space with swag, and dedicated even a small space for equipment, supplies, and in progress projects. Youth in the YAI programs noticed and appreciated these cosmetic changes, stating the new, welcoming rooms made them feel **excited, creative, and inspired**.

The Bottom Line

The YAI research shows that small, practical changes—like painting a room bright colors, displaying artwork, using program swag to decorate—are powerful first steps in building an “Artful Sanctuary” where youth feel safe and valued. However, less-than-ideal spaces place limits on artistic growth, from restricted project types to physical safety concerns. Multipurpose OST organizations striving to increase the quality of their art programming need to seek out or create art spaces that signal to youth that they are valued and the arts are a priority.

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.



LEARN MORE ABOUT OUR ORGANIZATIONS

To learn more about **Research for Action**, visit www.researchforaction.org. To learn more about **McClanahan Associates**, visit www.maieval.com.

This research was
commissioned and
funded by The Wallace
Foundation as part of
its mission to support
and share effective
ideas and practices.