

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

## Principle 4: Culture of High Expectations

### Support for Artistic Excellence: Implementing High Expectations



## Overview

Multipurpose out-of-school time (OST) organizations often aspire to hold high expectations for young people—challenging them, nurturing their potential, and affirming their growth. But in the arts, “high expectations” require more than what traditional arts-and-crafts-based programming offers. This is the heart of **Principle 4: A culture of high expectations, respect for creative expression, and affirmation of youth participants as artists.**

Principle 4 distinguishes high-quality arts programs from the “popsicle sticks and googly eyes” arts-and-crafts model. The Principle emphasizes that youth deserve the structure, support, and challenge to develop their own artistic skills and creative voice. When multipurpose OST organizations embrace this Principle in their arts programs, they invite youth to aim for “*artistic excellence*,” similar to the opportunities offered by community arts organizations.

### 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.

# What High Expectations Look Like and Why They Matter

Traditional arts-and-crafts programming often relies on scripted projects, inexpensive materials, and minimal instruction, leading to uniform products rather than authentic expression. By contrast, high-quality arts programs:

## → EMPOWER ORIGINALITY

Youth create work that is truly their own.

## → BALANCE CHALLENGE WITH CARE

Teaching artist mentors provide feedback and skill-building while ensuring safety, belonging, and youth voice.

## → REQUIRE COMMITMENT

Regular attendance supports skill development and signals seriousness of purpose.

## → OFFER PROFESSIONAL INFRASTRUCTURE

Access to teaching artists, studio spaces, and quality materials mirror near-professional environments.

### High expectations matter for these reasons:

**Engagement.** Research shows middle school youth respond positively to high expectations when paired with support. In one study, participation in a high-quality arts program kept middle school youth coming to their program more consistently and for longer duration than middle school participants in other multipurpose OST offerings.

**Skill-building and Career Exploration.** High expectations create pathways for youth to deepen their craft in mediums they care about and learn about career opportunities in the arts.

**Self-expression.** As skills grow, so do opportunities for identity exploration, cultural connection, and emotional expression.

## Core Challenges for Multipurpose OST Organizations

Elevating expectations is not without tension. Multipurpose OST organizations must balance quality with accessibility, and the shift can disrupt familiar routines:

### SCHEDULES AND ATTENDANCE

Regular participation (2–3 times per week) challenges drop-in models and requires parent buy-in to ensure youth are not picked up mid-program.

### INFRASTRUCTURE COSTS AND SPECIALIZATION

Professional artists, equipment, and studio spaces demand greater investment than traditional arts and crafts programs and even other program areas. Multipurpose OST organization leaders may struggle to justify greater investments in one program area. Staff may need clarity on why these resources are specialized, and, for example, other program staff may not be able to utilize them.

### YOUTH ACCLIMATION

Middle schoolers thrive under high expectations, but teaching artists must integrate these expectations with other youth development practices that are relational, responsive to youth interests, and emotionally and physically safe—especially for beginners who are used to more autonomy in afterschool settings.

# Practical Strategies for Multipurpose OST Organizations



## PRIORITIZE TEACHING ARTISTS

Even without ideal space or equipment, teaching artists are the gamechangers. They embody high expectations and elevate program quality.



## DESIGN FOR ORIGINALITY

Encourage experimentation with diverse materials and tools to foster authentic artistic voice.



## ENGAGE PARENTS

Share the rationale for consistent attendance. Culminating events often convince families of the program's value.



## COLLABORATE ON ATTENDANCE

Incentivize youth participation and coordinate with staff to make daily attendance feasible.



## ESTABLISH ROUTINES

Warm-ups, rituals, and even application processes can signal seriousness and set the tone for excellence.

## The Bottom Line

High expectations in youth arts programming are not about demanding perfection; they are about affirming young people as artists, worthy of challenge, investment, and respect. When multipurpose OST organizations embrace Principle 4, in their arts programs, they don't just raise the bar for quality; they raise the bar for equity, opportunity, and youth voice.

# 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](mailto:thartmann@researchforaction.org) and [wmclanahan@maieval.com](mailto:wmclanahan@maieval.com).



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