

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

## Principle 7: Youth Voice and Leadership

### *Amplifying Youth Voice: Input, Leadership, and Agency in the Arts*

## Overview



Youth voice is a cornerstone of any youth development program, as it drives belonging, motivation, and meaningful growth. Youth voice is especially important in arts-focused youth programming, where creative expression is inseparable from culture, community, and the futures young people imagine for themselves. When young people shape their arts learning environments, they deepen their sense of identity, agency, connection, and mattering.

Yet, in many multipurpose out-of-school time (OST) organizations, arts programming defaults to traditional crafts or adult-designed projects. The result is limited opportunities for youth to make decisions, lead, or bring their full selves into their art. And when those opportunities are missing, so are the powerful developmental outcomes that high-quality arts programs can deliver.

Integrating youth voice and leadership into multipurpose OST organization arts programming presents real challenges. This integration requires intentional design, organizational commitment, and a willingness to rethink long-standing practices. Here is how multipurpose OST organizations can implement **Principle 7: Youth participants actively shape programs and assume meaningful leadership roles.**

### 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 Youth Input and Leadership Matter, Especially in the Arts



## YOUTH VOICE DRIVES ENGAGEMENT AND RETENTION

Our **research** shows that centering youth interests in multipurpose OST organization arts programs is essential for engaging tweens, a notoriously hard-to-retain age group. In focus groups with young people, they shared that they stayed engaged, in part because the teaching artist listened to them and their ideas. Conversely, when programming drifted away from their interests, they described the programs as “boring,” and attendance dropped.



## INTEREST-DRIVEN ARTS PROGRAMMING ALLOWS YOUTH TO BRING THEIR WHOLE SELVES

Creating space for youth voice isn’t just about engagement—it’s about honoring young people as creators and emerging leaders. When youth help shape programs, those programs become more culturally grounded, more relevant, and more likely to have a long-term impact. In addition, **interest-driven arts experiences** help youth connect their cultural aesthetics, their communities, and their future aspirations. As youth take on age-appropriate leadership roles, they also build skills that can open doors to future creative or professional pathways.

## Core Challenges for Multipurpose OST Organizations

In our research, we documented how youth voice showed up at every level of the arts initiative—from shaping the overall program vision to influencing the day-to-day experience in individual classes. Youth selected art forms, weighed in on studio design, and provided feedback on artist-mentor candidates. But as multipurpose OST organizations expanded youth voice, several tensions emerged:

### FLEXIBILITY VS. A SCRIPTED CURRICULUM

While most multipurpose OST organization programming relies on scripted curricula, high-quality arts programming does not. This programming requires nimbleness, responsiveness, and space for youth-driven exploration. For example, one artist shared that he arrived with a detailed digital arts curriculum—only to realize that youth needed cameras in their hands immediately, not a step-by-step lesson plan. Yet staffing structures often don’t allow for planning time or flexibility in purchasing supplies. As a result, many teaching artists work unpaid hours for planning and have expressed frustration with organizational “red tape” for ordering supplies without significant lead time.

### BALANCING YOUTH VOICE WITH HIGH EXPECTATIONS AND SKILL DEVELOPMENT

High-quality arts programs aim to build skills in the arts so that youth have the tools they need for creative self-expression. Without clear boundaries and scaffolding, programs can drift off track in the name of “following youth interests.” Artists also can struggle to create leadership opportunities for tweens who are still learning foundational skills. While adult-guided youth input is essential, not all artists arrive with the youth development skills needed to strike this balance.

### YOUTH MAY HAVE LIMITED EXPOSURE TO ART FORMS

When asked what art forms they want, youth sometimes select options they don’t fully understand. In one multipurpose OST organization, youth chose “digital music,” but many actually wanted to sing and perform—activities not central to the digital music curriculum. In addition, organizational leaders were concerned that youth “didn’t know what they didn’t know” and could not consider art forms that were less familiar. Without exposure, youth input can become misaligned with what they truly want.

### YOUTH VOICE IS NOT MONOLITHIC, AND IT CHANGES OVER TIME

Multipurpose OST organizations and teaching artists quickly learned that some strategies for seeking youth input, such as voting, can elevate the voices of some youth and alienate the voices of others. For example, in one organization, the vote to select an art form broke down by gender, and boys were outnumbered. Boys lost interest when their preferred art form was not selected and were less likely to participate in the arts initiative.

### CULTURAL RESPONSIVENESS OF ARTISTS

In YAI, some organizations were excited to bring in high-profile artists. But prestige didn’t always translate to cultural alignment. Artists unfamiliar with youth culture sometimes designed projects that reflected their own interests more than those of young people, leading to disengagement.

# Practical Strategies for Multipurpose OST Organizations



## HIRE ARTIST MENTORS WITH STRONG YOUTH DEVELOPMENT SKILLS AND CULTURAL AWARENESS

Artists need youth development skills to navigate the tensions described above. Those who were passionate about young people—and culturally aware or representative of the youth they served—were best able to create interest-driven programming that honored youth culture. Multipurpose OST organizations should hire with these characteristics in mind and provide support to help artist mentors grow in their youth development skills.



## EXPOSE YOUTH TO A RANGE OF ART FORMS BEFORE ASKING FOR INPUT

Youth voice is strongest when youth have a sense of what's possible. Multipurpose OST organizations should offer demo classes, field trips, performances, exhibits, or studio tours to broaden their understanding before asking them to choose an art form.



## BUILD FLEXIBILITY AND PLANNING TIME INTO ARTIST SCHEDULES

High-quality arts programs require responsiveness. Multipurpose OST organizations should consider adding planning time and programming flexibility so artists can adapt to youth interests without working unpaid hours. Organizations may also consider adapting their supply purchasing processes to allow arts programming to respond to youth interests.



## LET LEADERSHIP EMERGE DEVELOPMENTALLY

As youth build skills, leadership opportunities naturally expand. In our study, leadership most often took the form of peer mentoring—leading warm-ups, helping with setup, or supporting peers. [Research](#) suggests that tween programs should be youth-informed, while teen programs should be youth-led.

## The Bottom Line

When multipurpose OST organizations embrace youth input and leadership, arts programming becomes more than a set of activities—it becomes a space where young people feel seen, heard, and empowered. The work is complex, but the results are significant: stronger engagement, deeper learning, and programs that reflect the brilliance and creativity young people bring every day.

# 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 culminate in high-quality public events with real audiences.

## 6 POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS

Positive relationships with adult mentors and peers foster a sense of belonging and acceptance.

## 7 YOUTH VOICE AND LEADERSHIP

Youth participants actively shape programs and assume 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 on RFA's website [here](#), MAI's website [here](#), and the 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 [wmcclanahan@maieval.com](mailto:wmcclanahan@maieval.com).



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