

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

## Principle 1: Professional Artists as Instructors

### *Hiring Professional Teaching Artists: The Gamechanger for Youth Arts Programs*

## Overview

Many multipurpose OST (out-of-school time) organizations operate in contexts of resource scarcity. They often rely on youth development generalists who can staff a wide range of programs, typically at entry-level wages and in part-time roles. While this staffing model is reasonable in a resource-limited environment, it creates an inherent tension with offering high-quality arts programs. High-quality arts programs are defined by **Principle 1: Instructors are professional artists with strong youth development skills who are adequately compensated for their expertise.**

High-quality arts programs are led by professional teaching artists because they seek to encourage **artistic excellence** and offer near professional arts experiences. Multipurpose OST organizations often struggle to provide the key infrastructure of a professional arts experience—arts studio spaces and near professional materials and equipment. In addition, **our research** has shown that professional teaching artists can mitigate these limitations and still offer quality art skill development programs. Multipurpose OST organizations who invested in professional teaching artists described these professionals as the “gamechanger”—the one non-negotiable investment required if organizations are serious about quality arts programming.



### 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.

# 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.

# Why Teaching Artists Are Essential for High-Quality Arts Programs

Professional teaching artists bring artistic training and lived experience as working artists. Their expertise is technical and deeply motivational for young people. There are several reasons why their presence is indispensable:

## → RESPONSIVE PROGRAM DESIGN

High-quality arts programs are unscripted and adapt to youth interests. Teaching artists have the skill to design projects that respond to youth ideas, and engage, challenge, and inspire.

## → HIGH EXPECTATIONS FOR SKILL DEVELOPMENT

Artistic training enables teaching artists to push youth to grow, refine their craft, and express their creative voice.

## → CREDIBILITY AND INSPIRATION

Middle school youth, in particular, are drawn to the **“wow” factor** of professional artists. **Our research** confirmed that casual encounters with teaching artists—during snack time, demo lessons, or informal interactions—often sparked youth interest in trying out new arts programs. And, relationships with teaching artists kept young people engaged in programs over time.

## → CAREER MODELING

Teaching artists embody the possibility of a life-sustaining career in the arts, showing young people that their passion can translate into a professional pathway.

# Core Challenges for Multipurpose OST Organizations

Hiring professional teaching artists can be a stretch for multipurpose OST organizations. Organizations in YAI identified several obstacles they needed to overcome.

## COMPENSATION

Teaching artists cannot be recruited or retained at the same wage levels as generalist frontline staff. Yet higher pay can create internal equity concerns.

## BRANDING OF ARTISTIC WORK

Tensions can arise over how youth-created art is branded or attributed within the organization, as artists often sustain themselves through their own entrepreneurial efforts.

## ROLE EXPECTATIONS

Unlike generalists, teaching artists focus narrowly on arts programming. Their responsibilities—lesson planning, obtaining and preparing art supplies, organizing culminating events, and building partnerships—are intensive and allow less flexibility for covering snack duty or bus duty.

## ORGANIZATIONAL INTEGRATION

Different compensation structures and role definitions can make integration difficult. Teaching artists may struggle to attend staff meetings or require flexible hours to balance other artistic work.

# Practical Strategies for Multipurpose OST Organizations

Later phases of YAI research identified practical strategies that organizations used to address these challenges and increase the quality of their arts programming with teaching artists:



## COMPENSATE TEACHING ARTISTS AS CONTENT SPECIALISTS

Create specialist positions, similar to those developed for certified teachers in OST academic programming. This helps justify higher salaries and uniquely structured roles within the existing staff structure.



## BALANCE REACH WITH DEPTH

Place teaching artists in two locations to serve more youth. But, ensure artists mentor youth in no more than two locations and remain stationed for at least a year to build meaningful relationships.



## HIRE EARLY-CAREER TEACHING ARTISTS

Art school students or recent graduates bring training and cultural relevance. They are open to more modest wages than more experienced teaching artists. In our research, we describe how early career teaching artists connected with young people, given their proximity in age and familiarity with youth culture. In addition, they were successful in helping beginning artists to develop fundamental arts skills.



## FOCUS THE ARTIST'S ROLE AND PROVIDE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT STAFF PARTNERS TO ENSURE CONTINUITY

Surround teaching artists with staff who handle family engagement, culminating events, and partnerships, allowing artists to concentrate on instruction. Assign staff who are interested in the arts to support youth when artists are off-site, maintaining continuity and engagement.



## ENSURE CONTRACTS ADDRESS POTENTIAL POINTS OF TENSION UPFRONT AND RECOGNIZE THE UNIQUENESS OF THE ROLE

Multipurpose OST organizations should develop employment contracts that recognize artists' roles as distinct from other youth development staff and clarify youth arts branding issues upfront.



## PARTNER WITH COMMUNITY ARTS ORGANIZATIONS

Tap into their networks to staff teaching artist positions quickly, and partner with artists who bring scripted curricula to ensure their programming is beginner-friendly and youth-driven to sustain engagement in drop-in environments. Support external teaching artists with youth development staff partners who can orient artists to the organization's norms and practices.

## The Bottom Line

Hiring professional teaching artists is not a luxury—it is the cornerstone of high-quality youth arts programming. While tensions around compensation, role definition, and integration are real, YAI research demonstrates that sustainable solutions exist. For multipurpose OST organizations committed to elevating their arts programs, investing in teaching artists is the single most transformative step they can take.

# 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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