

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

Principle 6: Positive Relationships

Cultivating a Creative Community: Promoting Positive Relationships

Overview

When it comes to building strong, supportive bonds with and among youth, multipurpose out-of-school time (OST) organizations are the experts. Their staff excel at fostering relationships that young people need to thrive. When introducing high-quality arts programming, those positive relationships must be expanded to support creative risk-taking and skill-building. These expansions require a specific approach, one that combines youth development expertise with professional artistic mastery.

These relationships are the focus of **Principle 6: Positive relationships with adult mentors and peers foster a sense of belonging and acceptance.**

To increase the quality of an arts program, multipurpose OST organizations can build on their strong foundation to foster a specific type of connection: adults who model professional artistic mastery and peers who support one another as creative collaborators. **Research from the Youth Arts Initiative (YAI)** reveals that for pre-teens and young teens, the social environment is often the primary driver of retention.

Here is how multipurpose OST organizations can implement Principle 6 to deepen engagement and skill development.



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 Relationships Look Different in High-Quality Arts Programs

Positive relationships in out-of-school time programs maintain harmony and ensure everyone feels welcome. However, high-quality arts programs for pre-teens and teens require “**developmental relationships**” that can foster holistic growth and thriving. In high-quality arts programs, these relationships serve three deeper, strategic functions:

→ THEY BOLSTER RETENTION

Young teens “vote with their feet.” For **this age group**, the decision to stay in the art program was driven by the social environment. If the pre-teens and teens didn’t feel a connection to the artist or a sense of belonging with their peers, they didn’t return. Strong, positive relationships are the primary mechanism for keeping youth in the room long enough to learn.

→ THEY CREATE A SAFETY NET FOR VULNERABILITY

Art requires risk. To sing a solo, share a poem, or display a drawing is an act of vulnerability. Without a **deep foundation of trust**, youth will not take these creative risks. Strong relationships create an “**Artful Sanctuary**”—a protective container where youth feel safe enough to fail, experiment, and express their authentic selves.

→ THEY SHIFT THE FOCUS TO SKILL-BUILDING

In many drop-in programs at multipurpose OST organizations, youth workers do the vital work of building relationships, leading recreational activities, and supervising youth. Developing art skills, however, requires a specific coaching talent. When an adult is an expert art mentor, it signals to the youth that they are there to learn art, not just spend time together. This apprentice dynamic affirms that the youth is a capable artist worthy of serious investment.

Core Challenges for Multipurpose OST Organizations

Implementing Principle 6 can reveal gaps between artistic expertise and youth development expertise, including:

VALUING SPECIALIZATION

Professional artists are often hired for their deep content expertise—their “superpower” is their mastery of the craft. This specialized focus is exactly what attracts young people. The challenge for multipurpose OST organizations is not to turn artists into generalists, but to support a cross-training environment where artists can adapt their deep content knowledge to the drop-in setting and receive support with classroom management and helping youth with complex emotional needs.

SUPERVISION VS. MENTORSHIP

In YAI, effective relationships were built on one-on-one support. **Youth stayed in programs** when they believed the artist “listened to them” and provided individual coaching. This shift to individual mentorship is essential for quality, but requires intentional staffing.

PROVIDING SUPPORT AND CHALLENGING GROWTH

Effective **developmental relationships** that help youth thrive balance support with appropriate challenge. Youth development professionals excel at fostering belonging and encouragement, while teaching artists contribute specialized expertise in developing artistic skills. In YAI, teaching artists balanced supportive relationships with appropriate challenges to build artistic skills in a drop-in OST environment. Youth stayed in programs when they believed the artist truly listened to them and offered individualized coaching that pushed them just enough. This shift toward individualized mentorship is essential for quality, but requires deliberate staffing and preparation.

PEER FRICTION

While the arts bring youth together, **tension can also arise**. Veteran students can sometimes become critical of beginners, or they may not want to share supplies or teaching artists with others. Programs require adults who can actively manage these dynamics to ensure the studio remains a safe space for risk-taking.

Practical Strategies for Multipurpose OST Organizations

Developing and maintaining relationships that facilitate art skills development requires intentionality. By structuring your team and your time to maximize everyone's strengths, you can build a deeper creative community.



MAXIMIZE IMPACT THROUGH CO-STAFFING

Pairing the content expert (e.g., the teaching artist) with the context expert (e.g., youth development staff) is a co-mentorship approach that leverages the distinct strengths of both professionals. The multipurpose OST organization staff member uses their existing relationships to provide support and engage families, which enables the artist to focus on high-quality instruction. This partnership can create a natural cross-training effect where artists learn youth development strategies and develop mentoring relationships with young people and staff gain artistic appreciation.



BUILD COMMUNITY THROUGH STUDIO RITUALS

Relationships in the arts are strengthened by specific routines that signal the shift from a “recreational” to a “creative” space. [Research](#) recommends starting every session with an opening circle or check-in to help youth transition from high energy drop in settings to the studio. Additionally, implementing tools like brag boards, where youth write positive comments about their peers' work, actively structures peer support. These tools and rituals ensure that the environment remains affirming and collaborative, turning the studio into a space where youth champion each other's success.



EXTEND CONNECTIONS BEYOND CLASS TIME

Trust is often built in the informal moments before instruction begins. For example, [artists who arrive early](#) to hang out in common areas—like the gym or snack room—can build stronger bonds with youth. This visibility allows youth to connect with the artist as a person first, creating a rapport that pays dividends when the focused work of the studio begins. By valuing this time, multipurpose OST organizations can deepen the sense of belonging that keeps youth coming back.

The Bottom Line

Relationships are the safety net that allows skill-building to happen in arts programs. When multipurpose OST organizations support artists' youth development skills and structure the environment with rituals like opening circles and peer shout-outs, they create an environment where youth feel safe as their authentic selves.

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

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 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 and wmcclanahan@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.

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