

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

Principle 9: Stakeholder Engagement

Building Bridges: Partnerships, Parents, and Pathways in Youth Arts

Overview



Multipurpose out-of-school time (OST) organizations routinely partner with families to support children's needs and gather input on programming. Many also collaborate with community groups to access resources, enrich content, and bolster sustainability. Yet, these partnerships may not be focused on elevating arts programming or inclusive of community arts organizations—leaving youth arts programming disconnected from the broader community. As a result, arts programs at multipurpose OST organizations miss out on opportunities for youth recognition, artistic growth, and program sustainability that deeper, more diverse partnerships can unlock.

As multipurpose OST organizations attempt to raise the quality of their arts programming, family and community partnerships can help create connected arts learning experiences that generate [meaningful long-term impact for young people](#). However, the partnerships needed for arts programming may be unique for multipurpose OST organizations, and family engagement in arts programming may look different than in other programs. In this brief, we describe how multipurpose OST organizations can implement **Principle 9: Programs strategically engage key stakeholders to create a network of support for both youth participants and the programs.**

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 Family and Community Partnerships Matter in the Arts

High-quality youth arts programs rely on strong partnerships to deepen their impact, but the value of these relationships extends far beyond collaboration. Across our research and the work of others, three distinct but interconnected benefits emerged:



EXPANDED OPPORTUNITIES FOR ARTISTIC GROWTH AND PATHWAYS FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

Partnerships—especially with community arts organizations and professional artists—significantly expanded young people’s artistic opportunities. These collaborations opened doors the multipurpose OST organization couldn’t on its own: access to professional venues, exposure to new art forms, master classes, and mentors who broadened youths’ networks and, for advanced artists, pathways to further training and exposure to early career opportunities. Partnerships also strengthened the multipurpose OST organization’s instructional capacity by connecting programs to diverse teaching artists and ongoing professional support—via collaborations with colleges, social service organizations, and local businesses.



A SUPPORTIVE ECOSYSTEM AROUND YOUTH ARTISTS

A thriving arts experience relies not only on what happens inside the multipurpose OST organization, but in the network surrounding young artists. When families and community partners are engaged, they help affirm youth creativity and show that their artistic work matters. Even when caregivers are unfamiliar with the art forms, offering open rehearsals, workshops, informal showcases, and culminating events often turns them into strong champions of their children’s growth. Community engagement widens this support. Events in neighborhood spaces, cultural institutions, or public venues introduce youth artwork to broader audiences who express pride and shared investment. These partnerships create an ecosystem of encouragement, recognition, and community celebration around young artists.



INCREASED VISIBILITY AND SUSTAINABILITY OF THE PROGRAMS

Partnerships are a powerful way to elevate a multipurpose OST organization’s profile as an arts provider and strengthen long-term sustainability. Collaborations with local partners expand the reach of youth artwork and attract young people who might not otherwise find the program. Media partnerships amplify youth voices to broad audiences, building community pride and deepening support from board members, donors, and other stakeholders. Community arts organizations extend this visibility by connecting multipurpose OST organizations to their own audiences and donor networks, while partnerships with local businesses generate in-kind support, commissions, and direct funding. As visibility grows, so do opportunities for investment, creating a more stable foundation for the program’s future.

Core Challenges for Multipurpose OST Organizations

Building meaningful family and community partnerships is essential for high-quality youth arts programming, yet many multipurpose OST organizations find this work far more challenging than expected. Below, we describe three challenges these organizations encountered:

ENTERING THE ARTS SPACE WITHOUT THE NECESSARY RELATIONSHIPS OR SECTOR INSIGHT

Many multipurpose OST organizations in our research started high-quality arts programming without strong community arts partnerships. Even when relationships with community arts organizations existed, they were shallow—limited to occasional workshops or short-term engagements that brought arts exposure, but not deeper art engagement.

CLARIFYING RESPONSIBILITY FOR BUILDING AND SUSTAINING PARTNERSHIPS

Multipurpose OST organizations wrestled with whether teaching artists hired to implement the arts program or other organizational staff were best positioned to lead this work. Teaching artists had the relationships, credibility, and community insight, but leaders worried that partnerships would disappear if an artist left. The organizations also were concerned that partnership-building demanded time artists simply didn’t have while delivering intensive, high-quality programming. The result was a persistent tension: leveraging teaching artists’ strengths in partnership work while ensuring sustainable relationships that could endure beyond any one person.

DEEPENING CAREGIVER SUPPORT FOR THE ARTS

Many families were used to quick pickups that were convenient for their schedules, so longer rehearsals or studio time created scheduling challenges. Because caregivers rarely entered the building, teaching artists had limited chances to explain expectations or build relationships. In addition, many caregivers were unfamiliar with the art forms their children were learning and varied in their interest in the arts. These factors made early caregiver buy-in difficult.

Practical Strategies for Multipurpose OST Organizations



MAP THE COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIP LANDSCAPE

Youth interests should drive arts programming, but multipurpose OST organizations benefit from understanding which art forms already have strong community anchors. Some cities have vibrant film or music industries; others have colleges with standout arts departments or large, well-established community arts organizations in specific disciplines. Identifying these local assets early helps multipurpose OST organizations design programs that align with youth passions and the strengths of the surrounding arts ecosystem—setting the stage for more sustainable partnerships.



SHARE PARTNERSHIP RESPONSIBILITIES BETWEEN TEACHING ARTISTS AND ORGANIZATIONAL LEADERS

Teaching artists bring invaluable assets to partnership development: deep artistic networks, credibility in the arts community, and relationships with arts funders. Multipurpose OST organizations should tap into these strengths while recognizing the limits of relying solely on artists. Many organizations in our research relied upon an arts program director—someone with their own artistic background and networks—to co-lead or take primary responsibility for building partnerships. This shared approach balanced expertise with organizational stability.



LEVERAGE CULMINATING EVENTS TO ENGAGE MEDIA, DONORS, PUBLIC OFFICIALS, AND FAMILIES

These moments naturally draw stakeholders into the world of youth artists. Some multipurpose OST organizations hosted large cross-site showcases that attracted community leaders, reporters, board members, and funders, while others held smaller events for donors or board members. Across formats, these gatherings energized caregivers and partners, sparked new relationships, and built momentum that strengthened program sustainability.



HELP ARTISTS CONNECT WITH FAMILIES AND INTEGRATE THE ARTS INTO BROADER PARENT ENGAGEMENT EFFORTS

Because teaching artists often struggled to meet caregivers during busy pickup times, some multipurpose OST organizations had youth development staff serve as ambassadors—introducing families to the arts program and building relationships on the artists' behalf. Programs also hosted arts-focused family events such as demonstrations, preview performances, and meetings. Integrating youth artwork into organization-wide family engagement strengthened connections and elevated the arts program's visibility.

The Bottom Line

When multipurpose OST organizations engage caregivers, local artists, community organizations, and funders, they create a supportive ecosystem that expands artistic pathways, boosts visibility, and strengthens sustainability. By embracing Principle 9, arts programming at multipurpose OST organizations moves beyond standalone activities and builds connected arts experiences that affirm young people's identities, elevate their voices, and help them imagine new futures.

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 focus on hands-on skill building using current equipment and technology.

9 STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

Programs strategically engage key stakeholders to create a network of support for both youth participants and the programs.

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.



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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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