

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

Principle 10: Safe Spaces

Creating Safe Spaces: Promoting Physical and Emotional Safety



Overview

Multipurpose out-of-school time (OST) organizations prioritize safety by fostering supportive environments for youth development and social-emotional growth. However, in the context of the arts, safety requires a specialized approach that mitigates physical harm and creates an emotionally safe space for youth to express themselves artistically.

When done well, safety practices in the arts build upon a multipurpose OST organization's existing strengths to create an "[Artful Sanctuary](#)." These are spaces where youth can disconnect from outside stressors, and experience feelings of [joy, centeredness, and flow](#).

Here is how multipurpose OST organizations can implement **Principle 10: Programs provide a physically and emotionally safe place for youth.**

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 Safety is Essential for High-Quality Arts Programs

Why is this principle so vital for arts programs? Research shows that safety in an arts context serves three critical functions:

→ IT ALLOWS FOR VULNERABILITY

Artistic expression demands courage. Without the assurance that they will not be physically hurt or emotionally ridiculed, youth may not take the risks necessary to grow and learn.

→ IT PROVIDES A REFUGE

According to our research, some youth were drawn to the arts program because it felt safer than other spaces at multipurpose OST organizations. While the gym or game room might be chaotic, youth described the arts room as a “calm place” and a “safe spot.” This atmosphere of mutual respect was a primary driver for retention.

→ IT MITIGATES PHYSICAL RISKS

Moving beyond markers and glue to professional artistic practice introduces physical hazards. Multipurpose OST organizations must manage these risks—from ventilation for chemical sprays to sprung floors for dance—to ensure “high expectations” do not become dangerous.

Core Challenges for Multipurpose OST Organizations

The multipurpose OST organization’s facility is often the biggest hurdle to creating an “Artful Sanctuary.” These organizations are designed for visibility, high traffic, and shared use. While these features foster community safety (e.g., clear sightlines for supervision), they can create a “fishbowl effect” for arts programs where young artists feel “on display” before they are ready. Peers can look through windows, walk through rehearsals, or hear a vulnerable vocal practice from the hallway, compromising participants’ emotional safety.

Furthermore, safety does not exist in a vacuum; it relies on the infrastructure we have discussed in previous briefs. Multipurpose OST organizations cannot ensure physical safety without appropriate space (Principle 3) and equipment (Principle 8), and cannot foster emotional safety without a skilled teaching artist (Principle 1) to manage the room. When these resources are stretched, safety can suffer.

Practical Strategies for Multipurpose OST Organizations

Fortunately, research shows that multipurpose OST organizations can create safe spaces for art skill development. Youth Arts Initiative sites used several strategies to navigate these challenges:



CURATE THE ENVIRONMENT TO REDUCE THE FISHBOWL

Even in shared spaces, small changes can offer the privacy youth need. If a room has many windows, simple additions like curtains or paper coverings during rehearsals can transform a “fishbowl” into a private studio. This transformation to a studio allows youth to focus on their craft rather than on who is walking by.



CO-CREATE STUDIO NORMS

Emotional safety is a series of specific behavioral norms in class that are engineered and upheld by the teaching artist. Teaching artists must have strong youth development skills to create an emotionally safe environment.

- **Distinguish Critique vs. Criticism:** Teaching artists in YAI programs taught youth how to give and receive artistic feedback. This distinction turns peer interaction from a source of anxiety into a source of growth.
- **Establish Rituals of Entry:** Many artists used “check-ins” or “circle time” at the start of class. This ritual helps youth leave the day’s baggage at the door and mentally transition into the creative space.



ALIGN TOOLS AND MATERIALS WITH SAFETY

Providing high-quality, age-appropriate equipment (Principle 8) is a safety strategy.

- **Invest in Safe Tools:** Using equipment that is professional yet safe (e.g., sewing machines with speed control) empowers youth to master real skills without unnecessary risk.
- **Match Materials to the Space:** If you cannot change the facility, match the materials to the space. For example, use acrylic paints rather than oils if the room lacks proper ventilation, or invest in portable mats if the floor is too hard for dancing.

The Bottom Line

In a youth arts program, safety is about freedom, rather than restriction. By creating a physical and emotional container that holds them securely, youth can become their authentic selves. Safe spaces provide the soil in which artistic skill and youth well-being can truly grow.

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 a physically and emotionally safe place for youth.



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.

**This research was
commissioned and
funded by The Wallace
Foundation as part of
its mission to support
and share effective
ideas and practices.**