



CARE Program

Cultivating Arts-Rich Education

Lessons from Building Arts-Rich Learning in Rural South Carolina

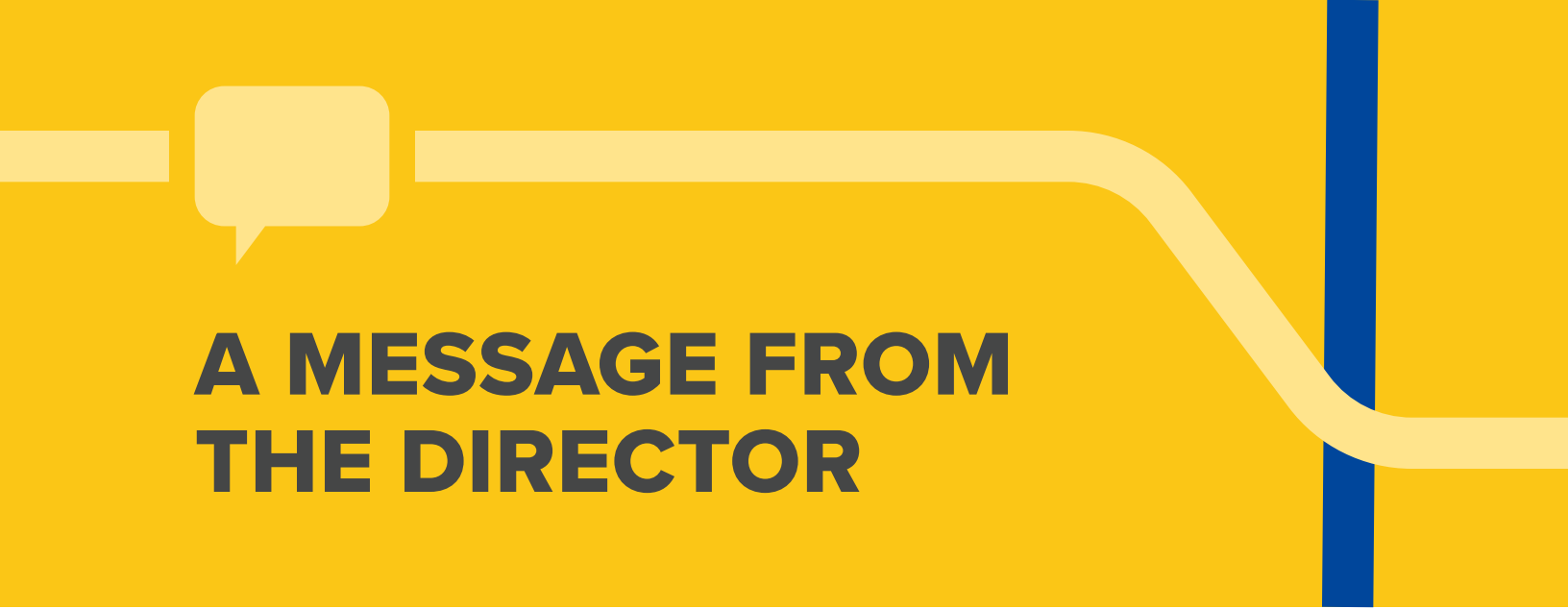
CARE Project Guidebook 2026



ABC INSTITUTE

Arts in Basic
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A MESSAGE FROM THE DIRECTOR

In 1987, a group of South Carolina leaders came together around a shared vision: all students should have access to a quality arts education, regardless of where they live or the resources available in their schools and communities.

With support from the National Endowment for the Arts and collaboration among the South Carolina Arts Commission, South Carolina Department of Education, and Winthrop University, the Arts in Basic Curriculum Project was created to help transform that vision into reality. Initial grants to schools and districts—many in rural communities—provided foundational investments intended to establish and strengthen arts education programs.

Over time, the ABC Project evolved into the ABC Institute, reflecting South Carolina's sustained commitment to arts education. Yet more than 30 years later, rural schools were not represented within the ABC network in proportion to their presence across the state. In 2021, the ABC Institute renewed its attention to this disparity and began developing what would become the **Community Access to the Arts in Rural Education (CARE) Project**, supported through the U.S. Department of Education's Assistance for Arts Education Grant program.

The CARE Project was intentionally designed to address an important gap in arts education and arts integration research. Leveraging Change: Increasing Access to Arts Education in Rural Areas (Donovan and Brown, date) provided a seminal examination of arts access in rural communities. Poverty was acknowledged as the most consistent impediment to access and identified Promising Practices, many of which resonated with ABC Institute's experience and historical successes. However, the study lacked representation from Southeastern states, where many rural communities experience persistent poverty. ABC Institute's CARE Project, therefore, intentionally sought to work alongside communities where economic scarcity has extended across generations and where changing economic conditions have diminished the financial and organizational infrastructure available to schools and families.

The project began from an essential premise: **the circumstances of poverty do not reflect a lack of talent, aspiration, creativity, or commitment.** Rather, persistent poverty and geographic isolation create structural barriers that require different approaches to building and sustaining access to arts education.

What followed was not a predetermined model implemented exactly as planned. CARE became a four-year process of **learning with communities, adapting to local conditions, testing approaches, building relationships, and identifying practices that could endure beyond the life of a grant.** Along the way, challenges required the project to reconsider assumptions, adjust strategies, and respond to the realities of rural schools and communities. The experience reinforced the importance of community assets, cross-sector partnerships, responsive professional learning, local champions, shared responsibility, and the flexibility to adapt when initial strategies encountered practical barriers.

This guidebook shares that journey with transparency. The first portion documents the CARE Project experience, including the evaluators' account of what was envisioned, what occurred, and what was learned. The second translates those lessons into practical guides and templates for schools, districts, community organizations, and regional and statewide partners seeking to strengthen arts access in rural communities. These tools are not intended to prescribe a single model or suggest that one community's experience can simply be replicated elsewhere. Instead, they invite communities to listen, identify assets, design reciprocal partnerships, act, learn, and adapt according to their own circumstances.

Ultimately, our journey has taught us to approach rural arts education from a perspective of **possibility, creativity, and shared capacity.** Rural communities experiencing persistent poverty face real and compounding challenges, but they also possess knowledge, relationships, cultural traditions, people, and resources that can become the foundation for arts-rich education. The work is to recognize, connect, and strengthen those assets in ways that expand opportunity and make access more durable for students.



Kim Wilson, Ed.D.

Director, Arts in Basic Curriculum Institute
The CARE Project Director and Principal Investigator



THE ORIGIN STORY OF THE CARE PROJECT

The Community Access to the Arts in Rural Education (CARE) Project emerged from a deliberate effort by the Arts in Basic Curriculum (ABC) Institute to align rural community assets with expanded access to arts education in SC.

“This allowed both districts to increase their arts programming and, in some ways, share resources in novel ways.”

While these rural South Carolina communities had many needs, access to arts education was a major one due to limited funding and complex staffing issues. Additionally, there was a lack of a national evidence base on effective practices to increase access to arts education in rural communities experiencing persistent poverty. More broadly, available data consistently demonstrate that rural communities, particularly those in the Southeast, struggle with high levels of persistent poverty (Lavalley, 2018). Schools in these geographically isolated communities often have a difficult time recruiting and retaining teachers, particularly in arts content areas (Showalter et al., 2025). The related challenges of low funding and staffing for those seeking to transform high-poverty, rural schools mean that efforts to bring more arts learning to rural communities encounter many roadblocks.

This is detrimental because we know that the arts can be a vital source of community uplift, ignite creativity, lead to higher job satisfaction for teachers, and ultimately provide students with a sense of belonging and an outlet for expression, while also increasing their academic achievement. Rural schools deserve these benefits and are situated in communities with many untapped resources.

These challenges and opportunities are prevalent in rural schools across South Carolina, motivating the ABC Institute to apply for the federal Assistance in Arts Education grant. Early conversations about the grant among the ABC Institute, the South Carolina Arts Commission (SCAC), and other statewide partners focused on identifying a community that was part of Rural SC: The Art of Community, an SCAC initiative. This meant identifying rural communities

SECTION 1

already demonstrating momentum in arts and cultural engagement; thought partners further narrowed consideration to those communities that included an education focus.

Allendale County quickly surfaced as a strong potential partner. Advocates within the SCAC connected the ABC Institute with local leaders, including school district leadership, historical and cultural organizations, and community arts champions. Following the grant award, the ABC Institute established an on-the-ground presence in Allendale County School District (ACSD) and officially launched the CARE Project. Project leaders met with community leaders to understand and build on a history of arts-based initiatives, including a summer STEAM program supported through external partnerships. This groundwork helped develop an understanding of the community's assets and also identified areas where the CARE Project could provide assistance.

While working with the ACSD for over a year, the CARE Project Director, who is also the director of the ABC Institute, developed relationships with the nearby Hampton County School District (HCSD). Like the first school district, HCSD is a small, rural district committed to learning in and through the arts that had decreased its arts programming after years of budget cuts and difficult decisions, ultimately making the arts a smaller part of its identity. Drawing on Donovan and Brown's (2017) work in the Berkshire region of Massachusetts, conceptualized as "thinking like a

region," the CARE Project Director brought both districts into partnership with the CARE Project to maximize the reach of the project's efforts in the area. This allowed both districts to increase their arts programming and, in some ways, share resources in novel ways.



THE ORIGIN STORY

ALLENDALE ARTS SHOWCASE

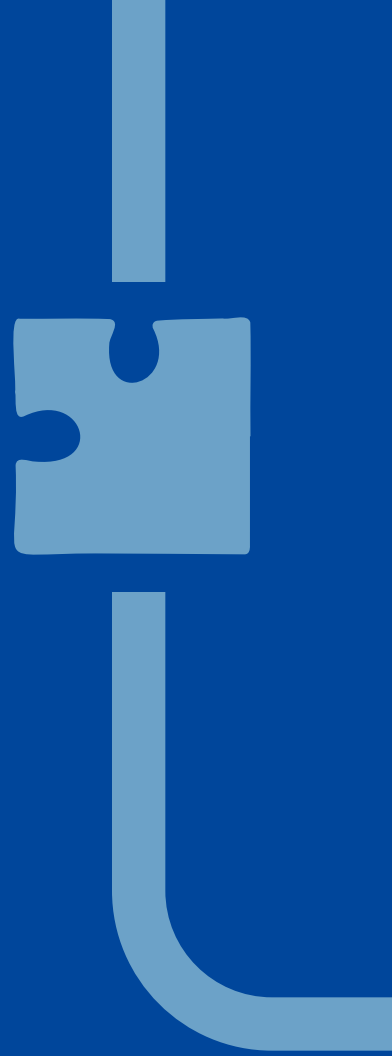
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SECTION 2

PROMISING PRACTICES FRAMEWORK FROM LEVERAGING CHANGE



The CARE Project was conceptualized based on a working paper, *Leveraging Change: Increasing Access to Arts Education in Rural Areas (Leveraging Change)*.

Authors Donovan and Brown (2017) noted key impediments to expanding arts education in rural areas and identified promising practices to increase access. The CARE Project team drew on those practices to design supports for the rural communities the project served. This section of the guidebook defines the promising practices that guided the CARE Project, describes plans for implementing those practices, and provides an example of project implementation.

 Building on Rural Assets

“A strong sense of community connectedness defines many rural areas.”

Donovan and Brown (2017) noted that “rural areas include a sense of connectedness” (p.43). For instance, community members in rural areas are often well acquainted with one another and willing to support the community. The CARE Project sought to tap into this strength by partnering with community members engaged in the arts, the local university campus, and civic and faith-based partners.

The CARE Project saw success in this area by partnering with a local pastor to bring a new media course to students, drawing on the pastor's media expertise and that of some of his congregants.

The project also built on rural assets by partnering with the local, small university campus to use its auditorium to host school-related events and meetings to introduce the CARE Project. Another area of success around community connectedness was a partnership with a local arts-based organization to provide administrative coordination of a gallery project. The CARE Gallery Project provided schools in both districts with access to professional artwork through the local arts organization. These examples demonstrate the CARE Project's commitment to building on community assets to support the mission of increasing access to arts-rich learning.

Identifying and Using Resources Creatively

Donovan and Brown's (2017) research found that rural communities discovered creative ways to access additional funding for the arts or to make effective use of the funds they to which they already have access. The CARE Project creatively utilized community spaces, social capital, and cultural resources to foster an arts-rich community within schools. This asset-based approach repositioned our rural community partners as resource-rich environments capable of generating sustainable change through collaboration.

Early implementation demonstrated how existing community facilities could function as cultural infrastructure. Local partners hosted arts events and exhibitions that extended access beyond school walls. One example included a projection project at the Allendale County Library, where student artwork was digitally recorded and projected onto the building's exterior windows, making student creativity visible and accessible to the broader community.

The CARE Project also leveraged social networks and alumni connections to strengthen arts programs. The ACSD superintendent secured a baby grand piano and foundation support for annual tuning from former county residents, while the CARE Project purchased protective equipment to ensure the

instrument's longevity. Together, these braided investments created a lasting impact on the middle–high school choral program.

A promising instructional model emerged through a summer learning experience hosted by Hampton Friends of the Arts. Structured as a week-long camp, the model paired morning professional learning for teachers with afternoon instruction for students. Teachers immediately implemented new strategies with students, with support from a master teaching artist.

This approach collapsed the gap between professional learning and practice, increased educator confidence, and demonstrated a scalable model for rural contexts.

Collectively, these examples illustrate how expanding the definition of resources beyond funding enables rural communities to activate existing assets in creative ways. By leveraging space, relationships, and instructional innovation alongside targeted financial support, the CARE Project advanced both arts access and community vitality.

Reinvigorating Community Assets

Every community already holds the space, the people and the instruments an arts-rich school needs. Activation is the work of putting them back in use.

The Public Library

Student artwork projected across the library windows, on view to the whole town after closing.



The Faith Community

A community-led afterschool music and media club rehearsing and recording in the fellowship hall.



The Alumni Network

Braided funding to purchase and permanently maintain a baby grand piano for the choral program.



Using Technology to Span Geographic Divides

“Technology can increase the reach of professional development by enhancing connectivity.”

As Donovan and Brown (2017) noted, “Technology can increase the reach of professional development by enhancing connectivity” (69). Although not originally included in the CARE Project logic model, technology became a critical asset for expanding professional learning. Digital tools transformed a geographically isolated rural network into a connected virtual community, increasing access to sustained, discipline-specific support.

The CARE Project draws upon arts-rich learning through the ABC Institute and its statewide network of resources. As stated in the introduction, the CARE Project Director is also the Director of the ABC Institute. Given that the CARE

Project emerged from the ABC Institute’s commitment to serve rural school communities, the ABC Institute supported the CARE Project through its network and resources. At the same time, the CARE Project was operating, the ABC Institute was simultaneously developing a suite of digital resources for arts-based instruction. As challenges emerged from competing priorities for professional learning in the CARE Project school districts, the project team began incorporating technology to reach the districts at opportune times. Eventually, these digital resources became the primary infrastructure for professional learning across the CARE network.

One example of the kinds of ABC-developed digital resources available to educators through the CARE Project is One Stop Workshop. One Stop Workshop is a free, year-round virtual conference, supports discipline-specific arts education, arts integration,

and arts education leadership. With more than 180 on-demand sessions and periodic live-streamed learning days, educators can select professional learning aligned to their instructional needs, interests, and students' developmental levels.

180 On-Demand Sessions

185 Hours of Professional Development Attended

405 Educators Enrolled

Using Collaboration as a Tool to Create Change

Leveraging Change (2017) reframes collaboration from merely a mutually beneficial practice to a catalyst for systemic change. The CARE Project operationalized this approach by intentionally collaborating across sectors, borders, and disciplines. Built on the legacy of the ABC Institute—long recognized for collaborative practices within schools, communities, and a statewide network—the CARE Project embedded collaboration as core infrastructure rather than a supplemental strategy.



Collaborating Across Sectors

Faith-based partnerships drew on local congregations' musical expertise to support instruction in both counties. In Hampton County, a church provided space for a piano and guitar lab. In Allendale-Fairfax, a Year 2 music media afterschool program extended learning beyond the school day.



Collaborating Across Borders

The CARE Project used cross-district collaboration to stabilize programs. In Year 4, a veteran HCSD band director and the ACSD choral director assessed Allendale-Fairfax High School's band program to support a new hire.

The ABC Institute also advised technically: when Allendale-Fairfax designated a dance space, educators from two ABC Schools helped select equipment and state-approved vendors, speeding up procurement.



Collaborating Across Disciplines

A Hampton County middle school art teacher and Hampton Friends of the Arts board member helped develop the Gallery Project, bringing curated artwork into the school and positioning her as an in-house expert. With a supplemental teacher guide, educators across disciplines integrated the exhibit into instruction.

Establishing Effective Rural Networks

Developing arts-friendly policies to drive change

Leveraging Change (2017) notes that, in order to establish effective rural networks to strengthen arts-rich learning, efforts must attend to policy at the federal, state, and local levels and should attend to how rural communities might benefit from organizational cooperation, intentional grantmaking and funding, and programming that all attend to local context within the broader arts ecosystem. In this section, we will revisit the history of the ABC Institute to discuss how the CARE Project has shaped more arts-friendly policies for rural communities with persistent poverty. With more than 35 years of history, the ABC Project was initially founded as a state organization aimed at advancing standards-based arts instruction in schools. For rural schools, the ABC Project would provide grants to support arts education. The ABC Project has now evolved into the ABC Institute, and ABC school sites are now called ABC Certified Schools. In 2019, most ABC Certified Schools were in well-resourced communities, and ABC Institute's Advisory Council contemplated how to reinvest and reconnect with rural schools and their communities.

As stated in the introduction, the ABC Institute Director applied for a USDE Assistance in Arts Education grant to make a deep investment in a school district serving a rural community experiencing persistent poverty to explore the challenges and opportunities in providing students with access to arts learning. With input from partners such as the South Carolina Arts Commission (SCAC), the ABC Institute Director constructed a logic model for the CARE Project. The logic model was built upon the success of A+ Schools in North Carolina, the Georgia-based arts-integration professional learning provider ArtsNOW, and other whole-school arts-integration programs across the country, with community involvement to build capacity to support arts-rich learning, as characterized in ABC Certified Schools.

After the first couple of years of implementation in the Allendale County School District, it was evident that the same models that worked in well-resourced, economically connected were not working there, as the district was geographically and economically

isolated. As discussed in the sections on using resources creatively and collaborating widely, the Allendale County School District and, later, the Hampton County School District would require different curricular approaches to foster arts-rich learning environments.

To be clear, the need for a different approach does not stem from a deficit in the scholastic or artistic aptitude of teachers and students in these communities. The need for a different approach stems from differences in infrastructure in these communities. For

example, these communities do not have large tax bases or student enrollment numbers that support hiring a full-time district arts coordinator. In this study, we also found that even when a district is able to hire an arts teacher or district coordinator, geographic isolation may be a barrier to their living in the community and therefore working in the schools. These are some of the barriers we uncovered through this project. As a result, the ABC Institute has reshaped its programming to meet the needs of other rural communities that face economic disadvantages and geographic isolation.

The Structural Roadblocks of Rural Geography



Small tax bases and low enrollment make full-time district arts coordinators nearly impossible to fund.



Competing state mandates consume all available PD days, leaving none for new initiatives.



Even when funding exists, geographic isolation makes recruiting and retaining specialized educators difficult.



THE NEW CARE

Cultivating Arts-Rich Education

Although the federal grant project known as the CARE Project is coming to an end, the ABC Institute will sustain the lessons learned and develop a new approach to support similar communities through what will now be called the Cultivating Arts-Rich Education (CARE) Program. The purpose of the next iteration of the CARE Program is to provide responsive arts-learning infrastructure planning for rural districts, on-demand, relevant professional learning for rural educators, and additional classroom resource materials. As a result of the findings from the CARE Project, the new CARE Program will begin by supporting rural schools and school districts with templates and best practices to develop an Arts Education Strategic plan, as other ABC Institute schools do.

Next, the program will support communities by providing professional learning opportunities that span the geographic divides many of them face, using the technology that became a key component of the CARE Project. Lastly, to reduce barriers to implementation, the CARE Program will provide toolkits for immediate classroom use, enabling teachers to apply what they have learned. This program differs from the ABC Institute certification model, in which schools engage in a multi-year process of implementing a standards-based arts education curriculum. The new CARE Program can help minimally resourced schools begin their journey towards arts-rich learning.



The original CARE Project logo was based on the school districts we worked with.



Arts in Basic Curriculum

The ABC Institute logo uses bright, primary colors and elementary shapes to speak to it's connection to education.



The new CARE Program logo is a mash up of the two. Pulling the colors, shapes and fonts from the ABC brand and creating a child-like character tying back to the original logo shapes.

INTRODUCTION TO PROJECT EVALUATION AND FINDINGS

The work reflected in this guidebook was supported by a grant; however, the guidance included here can be applied by anyone planning and implementing arts learning initiatives in rural areas.

PROJECT EVALUATION & FINDINGS

Importantly, external convening entities are often essential to the successful implementation of such initiatives – including state or local arts agencies, university-based centers, and non-profit organizations. This work draws upon the working paper *Leveraging Change: Increasing Access to Arts Education in Rural Areas* (Donovan & Brown, 2017). While building upon *Leveraging Change*, this report also fills a crucial gap in the existing literature around what is required to increase access to learning in and through the arts. Specifically, our work diverges from that of Donovan and Brown in that we partnered with a community that is not only rural but also historically and persistently under-resourced and underserved.

In this publication, we will share lessons learned and recommendations from our four-year journey partnering with two rural Southeastern districts in communities with persistent poverty. Given the winding nature of our path, we will present this information framed around our journey, noting important points along the journey, important guideposts, and wisdom gained along the way. This guidebook also includes essential artifacts that might ease the burdens of the journey and help light the way for those hoping to expand access to the arts in rural communities with high poverty rates.

An evaluation team from the Research, Evaluation, and Measurement Center at the University of South Carolina partnered closely with the project team to collect data throughout the duration of

the project. The evaluation team generated monthly meeting notes documenting program implementation, conducted periodic reflective interviews with project leaders, and interviewed arts coordinators in rural school districts to broaden the lens of the work beyond participating districts. Evaluators developed a short set of project milestones that had been met to varying degrees of success, based on key benchmarks from the logic model and project plan, as well as insights from four years of project implementation. Then, the evaluation team led the project team through a day-long reflective exercise reflecting on those project milestones, including what they originally envisioned, what actually occurred, and how they would re-envision the project based on these reflections. Field notes and documentation of this exercise formed another data source. These data sources, along with other formal sources collected throughout the project (e.g., teacher and student surveys and professional development attendance records), form the foundation of this report.

Guidepost 1

Identify the right individuals to spearhead arts-based learning initiatives as a program manager.

Our Journey

It is clear that to implement initiatives to increase access to arts-based learning in rural communities, a person whose primary role is to convene and advance the initiative is essential. Our interviews with rural arts coordinators confirmed that individuals in these roles often “wear multiple hats.” This professional juggling typically involves handling several responsibilities across different programs. For example, one rural arts coordinator managed multiple programs within their school district, including gifted and talented programs and multilingual learning initiatives, making it nearly impossible for them to take on the additional role of managing a new initiative to expand arts access in their district. In the two rural school districts where the CARE Project operated, there was no arts coordinator. Therefore, it is

crucial that rural communities receive support from a dedicated convener to foster new partnerships, enhance existing arts programs, and develop sustainable practices within the community.

Given CARE’s focus on being responsive to the community’s needs and context, the principal investigator and her advisors sought program managers with ties to the communities they would serve. They also considered the individuals’ arts education experience. After seeing the project unfold, the most important qualities of the person managing the arts-based learning initiative seem to be project management experience, expertise in community/coalition building, and knowledge of the arts-based learning landscape.

Recommended Pathway

When hiring individuals to serve as conveners, ensure they have the right professional toolbox. Given that those working in rural schools often fulfill multiple roles, arts-based school transformation initiatives might provide a convener to lighten the load and help create sustainable structures for future district and school leaders to carry on once the project term ends. The professional skillset needed to accomplish this is that of a project manager. In particular, this role should be filled by someone who will take the initiative to convene a range of stakeholders to achieve a single goal. Similarly, the program manager for a project such as CARE can bring together personnel from the school district, the community, and beyond to achieve more arts-rich infrastructure and learning in the school district.

Along with professional competencies, a program manager for this type of project should also have a strong understanding of arts-rich learning. This person should know enough about the arts to connect the right community partner with an educator interested in integrating an art form into their classroom. Additionally, this individual should be able to help school districts consider capital investments, equipment, and instruments needed to develop and sustain arts-rich programs for students. While some of this knowledge can be gained from conferences and workshops, we recommend a program manager with experience in the arts field.

Finally, we recommend that those leading these types of initiatives have experience with meeting funder reporting requirements, such as collecting and organizing participation data, administering survey instruments, and maintaining detailed records, as well as some knowledge of implementation fidelity relevant to the project's context. Where applicable, this person should be connected to the convening organization.

SECTION 3

Guidepost 2

Start the journey with capital investments in the arts.

Our Journey

After the project continued with a new program manager, the team found success in building rapport and relationships with arts educators. In the first year of the program, the project team focused on building relationships and providing arts-integrated professional learning to non-arts teachers. Part of this decision was due to the direction district leaders wanted to go in, designating the elementary school as a STEAM school.

In Year 3, when the second program manager began, he collaborated with district leaders and arts teachers to restore and enhance arts equipment for classroom and student use. According to the project team, this improved morale and strengthened relationships within the school community.

Recommended Pathway

Invest in visible, tangible resources to build momentum. Based on the success of initiating strategic capital investments in arts areas, we recommend that project teams start here. By investing in arts teachers, classrooms, and arts programs across the school and district, the program fostered a positive reputation throughout the district. District and school staff and faculty were more aware of the project's aims, which were to increase arts-rich learning within the learning community. We recommend starting with a physical transformation to generate excitement and showcase the partnership's potential. Then, in subsequent years, purposefully select teachers and staff to engage with targeted professional learning experiences and coaching to sustain arts-rich practices across the district.



Success Story

One of the CARE Project's first principal investments was the purchase of a “whisper room,” a soundproof recording booth. This purchase was based on the previous year’s enrollment for a media club. Due to staffing shortages at the school level, the project’s then program manager reached out to a local pastor whose church had music technology equipment and whose staff were knowledgeable about its use at the local high school.

An afterschool club was established in the spring of 2023.

In partnership with a local faith-based organization, CARE Project has provided equipment and resources to establish a guitar project. The purpose of this project was to provide local students and community members with an opportunity to learn to play the guitar. Participants in this pilot program have included children, youth, and local community members.

SECTION 3

Guidepost 3

Establish Agreements with District or School Partners

Our Journey

The lack of official agreements between conveners and schools or districts can present a significant barrier to the implementation of arts-based initiatives. A primary focus of the CARE Project was to increase access to the arts through developing arts-rich learning environments (Objective 1). This objective was to be achieved through an extensive professional learning plan that was outlined in the grant narrative. However, the Project Director was unable to secure the number of district professional learning days required to host intensive professional development (PD) for teachers, thereby impeding progress throughout the initiative's duration.

The PD plan was central to the project, as the logic model posited that professional development would influence teaching practices, thereby enhancing student engagement and improving student success outcomes. From Years 2-5, the project team struggled to secure PD days and consistently offer PD. Instead, they could only provide PD when the district allowed them a day or a few hours in each quarter. They were unable to execute the intensive PD model. Because teacher professional learning was to be a key driver of change, there was no clear pathway for getting arts-based practices implemented across the schools.

Recommended Pathway

Establish a partner kick-off process with a memorandum of understanding (MoU). Given the important role of professional learning in changing teacher practices and improving student outcomes, it is essential to discuss with the district partner and reach an agreement on the required PD time to ensure successful implementation. An initial kick-off meeting, accompanied by a memorandum of understanding (MoU), is recommended before entering into a partnership with a district. An MoU is a dedicated document that can serve as a reference point if momentum stalls due to a partner failing to fulfill their responsibilities and obligations.

The kick-off meeting should include the chief academic officer (CAO) and the superintendent to ensure full participation in the plan. It is especially vital that the CAO (or whoever is responsible for approving and supporting PD initiatives) attends this meeting.

For those considering an initiative implemented at the school level, we also recommend including school-based principals and instructional leaders in the kick-off meeting. All personnel with decision-making authority over curriculum, instruction, and teacher professional development should be included in the initial meeting, and the MoU should be reviewed before entering a formal partnership. Agreement among all parties ensures that the arts-based initiative is the right fit for the school and

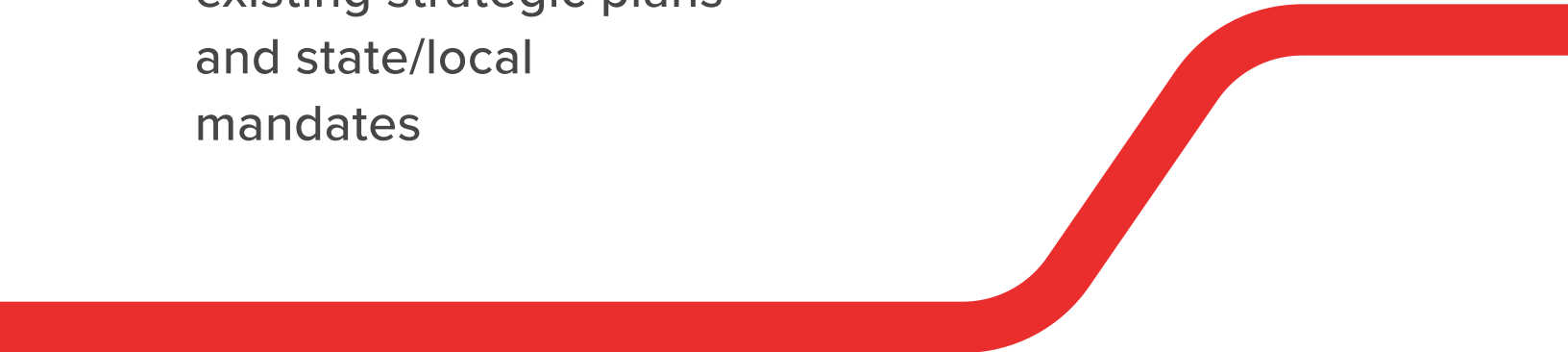
district's instructional goals. School principals also need to commit to the time and space necessary for the proposed professional development.

We suggest that this conversation takes place before the district or school community is chosen as the grant partner. The convener (in our case, an arts organization) might enter the MoU development process with a list of non-negotiables, along with other implementation areas that may be more flexible and tailored to local needs. In this way, both the grantee/convener and the proposed partner can walk away if needed to find a better fit for the project's goals.



Guidepost 4

Align your arts-based learning initiative with existing strategic plans and state/local mandates



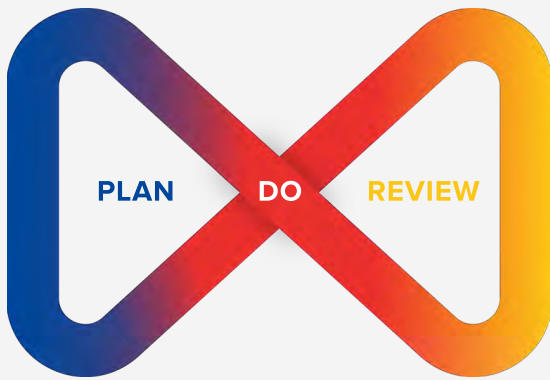
Our Journey

Some of the most persistent challenges in implementing the CARE Project stemmed from competing priorities arising from state mandates and policies that school districts had to comply with, as well as other local priorities. The initial district partner was under state control rather than governed by its own school board, hindering its ability to make curricular and budgetary decisions independently.

After restructuring and adding a second district, the CARE Project faced another broad setback in its capacity to broaden access to arts-based learning. In 2023, the South Carolina Department of Education mandated that all K-3 teachers

certified in early childhood, elementary, or special education statewide participate in a two-year professional development program on Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling (LETRS), a literacy approach focused on the science of reading. This professional development mandate had a substantial impact on the CARE Project's ability to provide and follow up on arts-based professional learning for all teachers in partner districts, as districts' professional learning days were dominated by meeting the LETRS mandate. Finally, in some cases, district instructional leaders and principals prioritized other approaches or initiatives in their buildings.

Act, Learn & Sustain



PLAN (Establish Agreements):

Build a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) that clarifies who decides, who approves, and who's simply informed.

DO (Brain Resources & Execute):

Tie actions to a clear Theory of Action. Braid cash and in-kind resources — facilities, transportation, personnel — to reveal true costs.

REVIEW (Measure learning, not just reporting):

Go beyond attendance counts. Measure participation quality, student agency, and gains in local capacity.

Recommended Pathway

Align with district strategic planning and other official guiding documents. Along with signing and agreeing upon shared responsibilities within an MoU, we recommend that arts-based initiatives collaborate with district and school staff to ensure that the arts-based initiative fits into the district's strategic plan and priorities.

As the project staff get to know the school district and move towards partnership, they should meet with the appropriate district personnel to uncover the priorities, performance goals, and strategies outlined in the strategic plan. Then, the initiative staff should clearly align their work with the school district's

needs and goals, and provide this information to district staff in a clear, concise manner.

In South Carolina, where the CARE Project was situated, all districts are required to submit district-wide strategic plans, and each school must develop a school renewal plan. These plans are developed every five years and updated annually as needed. We recommend that you first familiarize yourself with the goals that district and school partners have established through existing plans and mandates, so you can clearly articulate to stakeholders how your initiative aligns.

Success Story

To meet the needs of teachers and administrators in these two districts, the CARE Project shifted its professional learning strategy to include virtual learning through a robust platform where teachers self-select arts-rich professional learning experiences. This on-demand approach allows teachers to select an arts integration topic relevant to their discipline and students, and to attend at a time that works best for them. This meant that if a teacher had to attend a state-mandated session during the district-allotted PD time, they could continue learning through an on-demand session during their planning time, with other teachers during a PLC, or at any other time that fits their schedule.

Along with providing asynchronous virtual professional development options to meet the districts' needs, the CARE Project also hosted summer learning opportunities for teachers. They hosted "Materials & Methods in Visual Art," a summer learning camp that provided teachers with training in the basic principles of integrating materials and methods of visual art into their classroom

practice. Participants had a daily dedicated instructional period before working alongside the instructors and summer camp students to apply the course material in hands-on activities. This was a weeklong institute with four-day sessions led by local art teachers and acclaimed experts. The goal was to cultivate a studio mindset to boost arts-based learning in non-arts classrooms. Similarly, they provided "Music & Elements of Performance." This summer learning camp provided training in the basic principles of integrating music and the performing arts into their classroom practice. Participants had a daily period of dedicated instructional time before working side-by-side with our instructors and summer camp students to put the course material into hands-on practice. A weeklong institute with 4-day sessions was provided, with instructions from a local university professor and opera aficionado, and assistance from a local music teacher. The desired outcome was to develop a studio-mindset to accelerate arts-based learning in everyday classrooms.



Guidepost 5

Implement a voluntary model, starting with motivated educators to build excitement and momentum for your arts-based learning initiative.

Our Journey

The CARE Project was designed to provide professional development to all teachers, first in one rural, high-needs district and later in a second district in a neighboring county. As mentioned in Guidepost 2, the intensive PD plan could not be implemented as proposed.

Additionally, when the CARE team offered PD on district-planned days, many of the district's teachers were already mandated to attend other professional learning, leaving a much smaller pool to participate in the arts-based professional learning.

Recommended Pathway

Given the barriers to reaching all teachers in a district with arts-based learning approaches, we recommend that those implementing arts-based learning initiatives first engage educators who are excited about arts-based learning and have an “early adopter” mentality (Rogers, 2003; Basileo & Lyons, 2024). Even in our context, working with small, rural districts with fewer than 200 teachers, it was challenging to maintain continuity with the same teachers regularly receiving PD so that they could steadily increase their arts-rich practices.

Implementing a more voluntary model with a smaller number of educators

allows for an approach that includes intensive professional learning as well as responsive coaching on classroom implementation for those who volunteer to be early adopters. By working first with the most motivated educators, arts-based learning initiatives can build on the momentum generated by those early adopters, eventually leveraging their successes to recruit other, more reluctant educators to implement arts-based learning. We recommend that future implementers also consider prioritizing arts teachers among their early adopters, as they can be particularly well-positioned to model and sustain arts-based practices for colleagues across subject areas.



Success Story

This year, a new position was created at an elementary school in the initial partner district. The position is titled “Exploratory Arts”. A grade-level teacher with decades of dance experience was offered an opportunity to provide arts learning in dance, theater, and visual art. This teacher has been a champion for the CARE Project since it arrived in the school district. She’s attended professional development sessions and served as an instructor at a summer arts learning camp co-hosted by the CARE Project. Now, this early adopter is taking a step further

in bringing arts-rich learning experiences to students in her school community.

This experimental approach addresses many challenges in rural education. Oftentimes, student enrollment does not justify a full-time position in the arts. Additionally, arts learning is typically limited to the mandated arts disciplines of general music and visual art. This exploratory arts position supports a full-time arts educator and increases access to a comprehensive arts program. It also leverages local talent within the community.



The Power of Early Adopters

The Barrier:

State mandates consumed district PD time, stalling the intensive, whole-school training model.

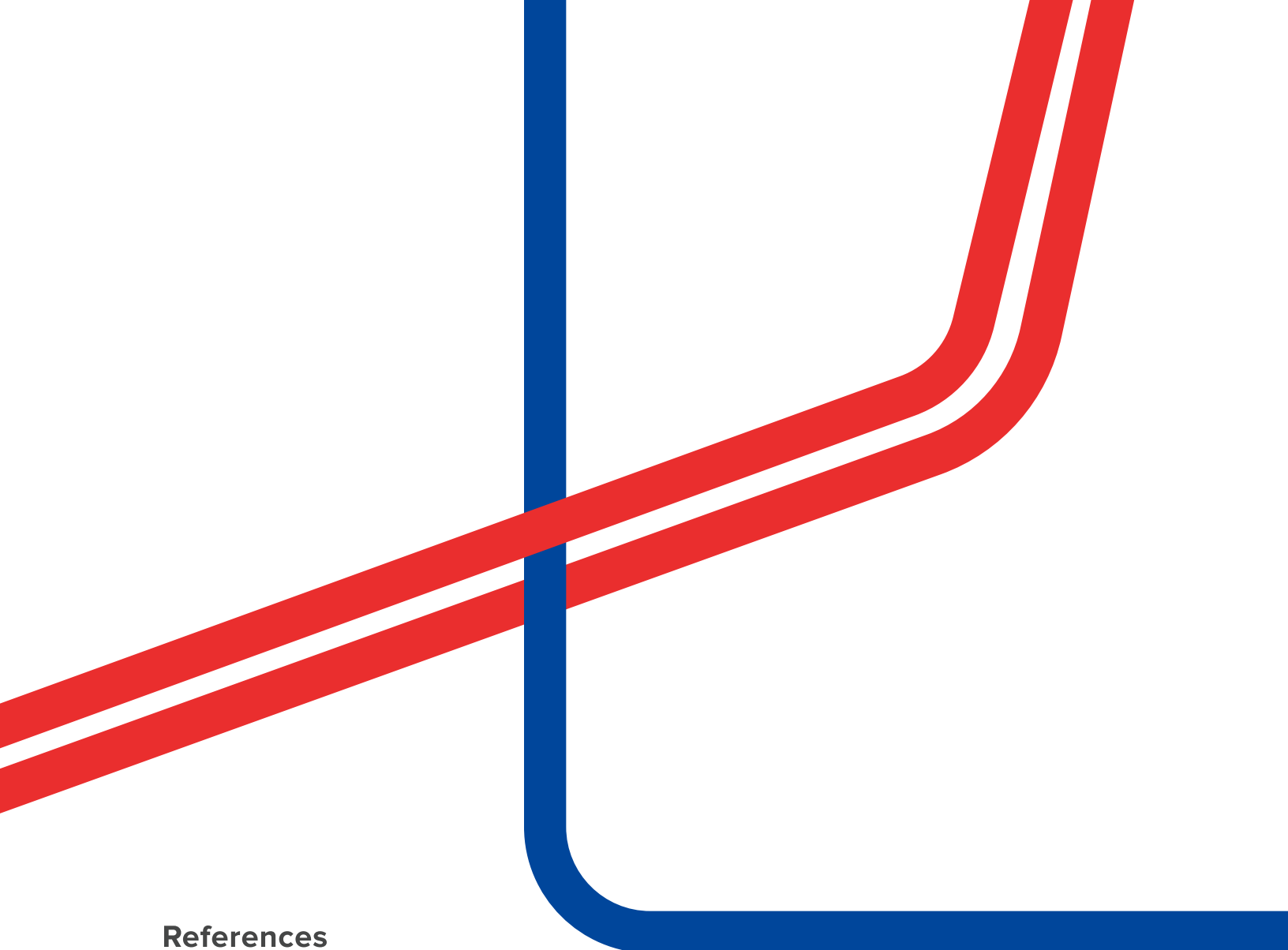
The Pivot:

The project shifted to a voluntary model — on-demand, virtual learning for the teachers who wanted it most.

The Result:

One elementary teacher, a dance veteran, used these resources and summer camps to earn a new "Exploratory Arts" position teaching dance, theater, and visual art — proof that backing one motivated champion can reshape a school's infrastructure.





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FROM CARE LESSONS TO PARTNERSHIP PRACTICE



The CARE Project showed that expanding access to learning in and through the arts in rural communities takes more than a single program, grant, or partner.

Listen to the community, build from existing strengths, design together.

Progress came from listening to local communities, recognizing the people and resources already present, building relationships, and adjusting plans when circumstances changed. The Community Partnerships Practice Guides carry those lessons forward by turning what CARE learned into a process that other communities can adapt.

The first lesson is to begin by listening. CARE's work grew through conversations with educators and community leaders and by learning what each community already had to offer. Local artists, churches, libraries, colleges, alumni, educators, facilities, and other community resources became part of the work. The Listening Guide and Asset Mapping tools build on that lesson. They ask partners to consider who currently has access to the arts, where barriers remain, what local traditions and knowledge should be valued, and which people or resources might help address those barriers.

The second lesson is that a useful resource does not automatically create a strong partnership. Partnerships work best when everyone understands why they are working together, what each

partner can contribute, and what each partner gains from the relationship. The Partnership Design Guide helps turn available assets into shared work by asking partners to identify a common purpose, clarify expectations, include student and family perspectives, and protect local identity and voice. This becomes especially important when partnerships extend across schools, districts, or regions.

CARE also showed that resources take many forms. Funding matters, but so do time, expertise, facilities, equipment, technology, transportation, relationships, and leadership. The Action and Implementation Guide helps partners identify what is needed, who is responsible, how decisions will be made, and how resources can be combined. It also encourages partners to think beyond the start of a project by considering recurring costs, maintenance, access, and what will be needed to continue the work over time.

Another important CARE lesson was the need to adapt. Not every original plan worked as expected. Geographic distance, staffing demands, scheduling, and competing priorities required the

SECTION 4

project to change course. Those adjustments led to new approaches, including regional collaboration and technology-supported professional learning. The Practice Guides build this same flexibility into a Plan–Do–Review process. Partners gather evidence, learn from experience, and make changes when needed.

Finally, strong partnerships depend on both leadership and shared responsibility. A convener can keep the work moving, but lasting partnerships cannot depend on one person. Roles, communication, decision-making, and responsibility must be shared and understood.

The CARE story offers lessons from one journey. These Practice Guides do not ask other communities to copy that journey. Instead, they offer a way to put its lessons into action: listen to the community, build from existing strengths, design together, share responsibility, use resources wisely, learn from experience, and adapt as conditions change. In this way, CARE’s experience becomes a practical starting point for communities working together to expand and sustain access to learning in and through the arts.

region,” the CARE Project Director brought both districts into partnership with the CARE Project to maximize the reach of the project’s efforts in the area. This allowed both districts to increase their arts programming and, in some ways, share resources in novel ways.



EPILOGUE



CARE Program

Cultivating Arts-Rich Education

COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS PRACTICE GUIDE

Expanding access to arts education often requires schools and communities to work across organizational, geographic, and resource boundaries.

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Introduction

Expanding access to arts education often requires schools and communities to work across organizational, geographic, and resource boundaries. Effective partnerships, however, begin with more than identifying an organization that can provide a program, service, or resource. They grow from a shared understanding of local aspirations and barriers, recognition of the assets already present within a community, and agreement about what partners can accomplish together that may be difficult to accomplish independently.

These Practice Guides provide a flexible process for developing reciprocal partnerships that strengthen access to high-quality learning in and through the arts. They are designed for use by schools and districts alongside artists, cultural organizations, nonprofit and service organizations, businesses, higher education institutions, government agencies, faith communities, families, and other community or regional partners.

The guides move through three connected stages:

- 1. Listening Guide — Understand the Community.** Listen to students, families, educators, and community members; identify existing opportunities, access barriers, local knowledge, and potential assets.
- 2. Partnership Design Guide — Design Together.** Determine partner fit, clarify reciprocal value and contributions, establish a shared purpose, and develop a theory of action.
- 3. Action & Implementation Guide — Act, Learn, and Sustain.** Translate the partnership design into agreements, responsibilities, communication structures, actions, resources, evidence, and processes for reflection and renewal.

The process is intended to be iterative rather than strictly linear. Partners may return to listening when conditions change, reconsider a design after reviewing evidence, or invite additional partners when new assets or needs emerge. Throughout the process, decisions should remain grounded in the central question: How will this partnership expand equitable access to meaningful, high-quality arts learning while strengthening the capacity of the people and communities involved?

The templates are adaptable. Add local terminology, discipline-specific criteria, district requirements, safeguarding procedures, accessibility standards, and other conditions necessary for your context.

Vocabulary

Arts-rich - educational opportunities include a combination of learning. While any one arts-rich practice is beneficial for student development, the combination of practices has shown to have significant influence on student achievement. (Eisner, Arts and the Creation of Mind), Arts-rich includes: Learning in the Arts; Learning through the Arts, and Exposure to Professional Artistic experiences (Field trips, or visiting artists).

Assets - people, organizations, resources, and community traditions that already exists

Condition - any guideline, restriction, or requirement that is considered non-negotiable to one or more partners. For example, grants have deadlines for application and final report submissions.

Learning in the Arts - learning the discipline and skill of an art form. The “Arts” refer to a breadth of artistic endeavors, including dance, drama (or theatre), music, visual art, creative writing, and media arts.

Learning through the Arts - an interdisciplinary approach to learning that leverages a shared skill, vocabulary, or character development that both the arts and other disciplines share. For example, scientific and artistic inquiry to question, observe, and resolve a problem.

Memorandum of Understanding - An agreement between two or more individuals or groups who want to work together. It simply outlines what everyone plans to do, without making a strict legally binding contract.

Sectors - portions of the community that represent different perspectives, such as government, economic, or cultural organizations.

Community Arts Access Listening Guide

Begin with listening rather than with a predetermined project.

The Community Arts Access Listening Guide helps partners develop a shared understanding of the community before deciding what a partnership should provide. Use the prompts to gather perspectives from students, families, educators, artists, community members, and organizations about where arts learning already occurs, who currently has access, where barriers remain, and what meaningful arts opportunities would look like locally.

Listening should surface both needs and assets. Pay particular attention to knowledge, traditions, relationships, spaces, people, resources, and practices that may not initially be identified as part of the formal arts education system. The goal is not to produce an exhaustive community assessment, but to identify the insights that should shape future partnership decisions and determine whose voices still need to be included.

At the conclusion of the conversation, identify the three most important insights that should influence partnership design and the people or groups who should be invited into the next stage of the process.

Community/Region

Participants & Perspectives Represented

Listening Prompts:

- Where do young people already make, perform, share, or encounter art*?
- Which students have the fewest opportunities, and what barriers shape that pattern?
- What would meaningful arts access look and feel like to students and families?
- Which local traditions, culture bearers, artists, spaces, and networks should be recognized?
- What has been tried? What built trust? What caused fatigue or harm?
- Which times, locations, communication methods, and supports would make participation feasible?
- What should remain locally owned even if the work becomes regional?

Three insights that should shape partnership design:

#1

#2

#3

Asset Mapping

Listening often reveals resources that are easy to overlook when partnership planning begins with a search for formal arts organizations. Use the Asset Map to document the people, organizations, spaces, expertise, equipment, relationships, and other resources that could contribute to the access challenge identified through listening.

Consider assets from multiple community sectors and note both their potential contribution and the conditions that affect their use. An asset may be valuable because it can fill an identified access gap, connect partners to additional networks, travel between communities, support digital participation, or strengthen local capacity over time.

Do not assume that every asset should become a partnership. The purpose of the map is to reveal possibilities. Use the final prompt, “Highest potential revealed by the map,” to identify which assets warrant further conversation during Partnership Design.

As you conduct your Listening Guide, community assets should begin to reveal themselves. Take note of community assets as potential partnerships.

- Look beyond formal arts organizations: include artists, alumni, craftspeople, churches, libraries, festivals, radio, extension services, parks, colleges, businesses, transportation providers, and digital creators.
- Identify dormant assets: unused instruments, stages, buses during off-hours, empty storefronts, recording equipment, meeting spaces, or expertise not yet connected to schools.
- Mark assets that can travel, assets that require students to travel, and assets that can be shared digitally.

Potential Sectors



Asset Mapping



Highest Potential Revealed By The Map

Partnership Design Guide

Move from a promising connection to a partnership worth pursuing.

Partner Fit

The Partnership Design Guide helps prospective partners determine whether they have sufficient shared purpose, reciprocal value, complementary assets, and capacity to work together effectively. Complete this guide with the prospective partner, rather than independently on the partner's behalf.

Begin with the Partner Fit discussion. For each question, first document the school or district perspective and the partner perspective separately. Then use the Shared Decision column to record what the parties agree will guide the partnership. Differences in perspective are useful information; they should be discussed rather than prematurely resolved for the sake of agreement.

The conversation should clarify why the partners are coming together, what each hopes to gain, what each can contribute, what limitations or non-negotiable conditions must be respected, how students and families will influence decisions, and what would make the relationship valuable enough to continue.

Proceed to partnership design when both parties can clearly describe a shared outcome, reciprocal contributions and benefits, the people and capacity required to do the work, and how they will learn and make decisions together.

Partnership Design

Once partner fit has been established, translate the conversation into a concise shared design. Name the partners, the access challenge the partnership will address, the learners or communities prioritized, the intended outcome, and the anticipated length of the project. Then articulate a Theory of Action connecting what partners will do with the change they expect to see.

A strong design should also identify how students and families will exercise voice and choice and how local identity, knowledge, and decision-making will be protected—particularly when a partnership extends across multiple schools, districts, or communities.

Partner Fit

What challenge or aspiration brings us together?

School/District Perspective	Partner Perspective	Shared Decision

What value does each party receive?

School/District Perspective	Partner Perspective	Shared Decision

What knowledge and assets does each contribute?

School/District Perspective	Partner Perspective	Shared Decision

What capacity limit or non-negotiables exist?

**School/District
Perspective**

Partner Perspective

Shared Decision

How will students/ families shape decisions?

**School/District
Perspective**

Partner Perspective

Shared Decision

What would make this relationship worth renewing?

**School/District
Perspective**

Partner Perspective

Shared Decision

Readiness Signal

Proceed when both parties can name the shared outcome, their own contribution and benefit, the people who will do the work, and how they will learn together.

Partnership Design

Partners

Partners

Partners

Partners

Partnership Project Title

Purpose (Access Challenge And Outcome, Priority Learners)

Theory Of Action If We...Then Students/Educators/Community Will...Because...

Length Of Project & Project Outcome:

Student/Family Voice & Choice Will Be Included By:

How Will Local Identity & Voice Be Protected:

Action & Implementation Guide

Turn a shared design into coordinated action.

The Action & Implementation Guide translates the partnership's Theory of Action into a practical Plan–Do–Review cycle. Use it collaboratively to clarify agreements, assign responsibility and decision authority, coordinate communication, identify resources, establish evidence of progress, and determine how the partnership will learn and adapt during implementation.

The guide is intended to make expectations visible across organizations. Because partners may operate under different policies, professional terminology, decision structures, budgets, and timelines, record agreements in language that all parties can understand. Distinguish clearly between what has been discussed, what has been agreed upon, who has authority to make particular decisions, and what conditions or approvals must be satisfied before action occurs.

The completed tables can also provide much of the information needed to develop a formal Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) or other partnership agreement.

Implementation follows three recurring stages:

PLAN — Establish agreements, roles, decision rights, communication processes, and responsibilities.

DO — Carry out specific actions, braid the financial and in-kind resources needed to support them, and gather evidence connected to the Theory of Action.

REVIEW — Examine results, partnership health, sustainability, and changing conditions to determine whether the work should be renewed, redesigned, expanded, paused, or concluded.

The goal is not simply to determine whether activities occurred. Partners should ask whether the work increased access to meaningful arts learning, maintained quality, strengthened belonging and agency, developed local capacity, and created conditions that can endure beyond a single project or funding cycle.

PREPARE: Partner Agreements

Translate the decisions made during Partnership Design into explicit agreements about how the partnership will operate. Clarify authority, shared assets, information use, communication, conflict resolution, and renewal before implementation begins.

Work Component	Agreement: Use Language That Is Easily Understood Across Sectors. Avoid Jargon. Include Details To Improve Clarity And Specificity.
Convener	
Local Decision Rights	
Regional Decision Rights	
Shared Services/Assets	
Data Ownership & Use	
Public Communication	
Conflict/ Exit Process	
Annual Renewal Process	

PLAN: Decision-making and Communication

Partnerships cross organizational structures, so responsibility and authority may not always reside with the same person. Use this table to identify who is responsible for the work, who has approval authority, whose expertise must be consulted, who needs to remain informed, and how frequently communication should occur.

Decision	Responsible	Approves	Consulted	Informed	Frequency
Program Design					
Instructional Quality					
Student/Family Recruitment & Support					
Budget/ Purchasing					
Data/ Consent					
Public Communication					

DO: Take Action

A partnership is established because no one partner has the capacity to address the challenge in isolation. Every decision is based on a Theory of Action (see Partnership Design): a specific action is intended to make a specific change.

Theory Of Action: If We (Action) Then Students/Educators/Community Will (Desired Outcome) Because (Indicator Of Success).

Break the Theory of Action into specific, observable actions. For each action, identify who will lead the work, the intended change, the evidence that will indicate progress, and the resources required for implementation.

Measurement and Learning Plan

Identify evidence that will help partners learn—not simply report. Measures should help determine who gained access, the quality and intensity of participation, participants' experience of belonging and agency, changes in educator or partner capacity, and whether the partnership is creating more durable conditions for arts learning.

Braiding Resources

Document the full set of resources required to carry out each action, regardless of which partner provides them. Include cash, grants, gifts, in-kind contributions, personnel, facilities, equipment, technology, transportation, and other costs so that the true resource requirements and future obligations of the partnership are visible.

Action And Implementation: Describe The Specific Action Agreed Upon By Partners And Who Is Responsible For Leading The Action.

Asset Mapping

What Would Indicate Our Desired Outcome?	Data Source/ Disaggregate By	Who Reviews?	Frequency?

Braiding Resources

Need/ Cost	Cash/ In-Kind Source	Grant/Gift Source	Recurring? One Time?	Restrictions/ Timing	Contingency

REVIEW: Sustainability

Sustainability does not necessarily mean preserving every activity or expense indefinitely. Review what level of arts learning the partnership was designed to provide, which elements are essential to quality and access, what recurring responsibilities must be embedded in existing systems, and what may appropriately change as local capacity grows.

Was The Learning Intended For Exposure (One Time Encounter), Participation (Several Contacts), Or Sustained Learning (Sequenced Instruction Over Time)?

How Will Recurring Needs Be Embedded/Addressed Once The Project Concludes?

What Can Be Reduced Without Weakening Quality Or Accessibility After The Project?

REVIEW: Partnership Health

A successful project does not automatically indicate a healthy partnership. Periodically examine the quality of the relationship itself, using evidence to discuss shared purpose, trust, reciprocity, clarity, equity, learning quality, distributed leadership, communication, and resilience. Use the review to make an explicit decision to renew, redesign, pause, or conclude the partnership.

Conduct at least once a year, or midpoint of any specific project timeline.

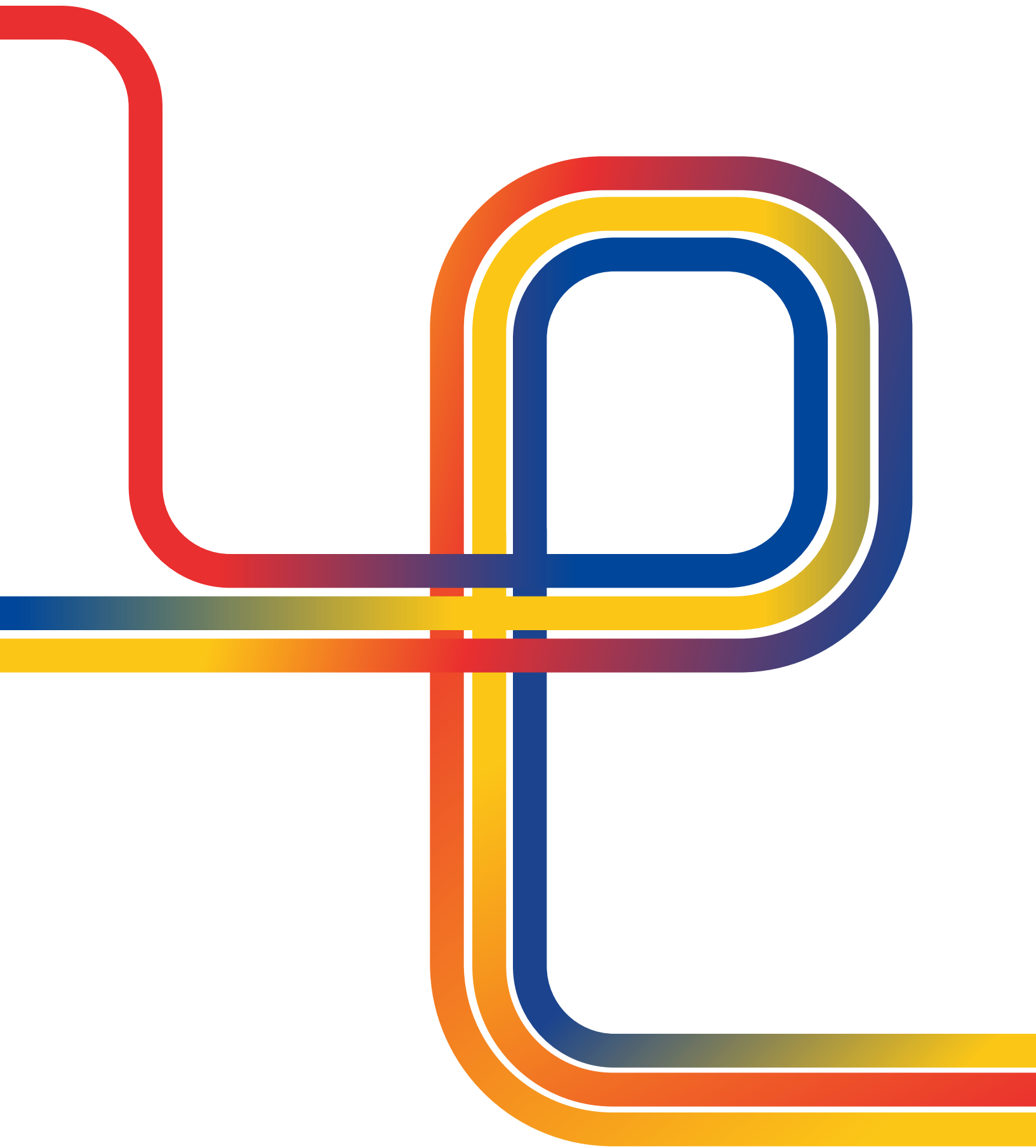
- Rate each statement: 1=not yet true; 2=emerging; 3=usually true; 4=consistently true.
- Discuss evidence of conditions before averaging scores.

Partnership Condition	1	2	3	4	Evidence/Action
Shared purpose is understood across roles					
Roles & decisions are clear					
Trust supports honest conversation					
Benefits & workload are reciprocal					
Student/family perspectives shape decisions					
Access barriers are actively reduced					
Arts learning is high quality					
Expertise circulates across organizations					
Resources & leadership are distributed					
Evidence is used for improvement					
Contributions are visible & celebrated					
The work can survive turnover or funding shifts					
Communication					



Renew, Redesign, Pause Or Conclude? Why?

One Commitment From Each Partner Before The Next Review:





CARE Program

Cultivating Arts-Rich Education