



COVID-19 and Arts Connect Partners: Funding Recommendations to Ensure Arts Education for All Houston ISD Students in 2020 and Beyond

Arts Connect Houston held calls on March 26th, 27th, and 30th with our partner organizations to deeply understand how interruptions due to COVID-19 are impacting their operations and ability to provide arts education programming. We spoke to representatives from 12 local arts organizations, the Director of Fine Arts at HISD, 2 HISD educators, and 2 national arts grantmaking organizations. From these calls, we were able to capture a robust picture of the impact of COVID-19 on the entire pipeline of funding and resources that Houston's arts educators rely on. In what follows, we narrate this impact and provide recommendations for the philanthropic community regarding the support Houston's art education community needs, both now, as we weather this pandemic, and into the future as we work towards our collective goal of an excellent, equitable arts education for all.

Key Takeaways

We would be remiss not to begin with the most consistent and hopeful theme of our calls: Our partner arts organizations and the HISD Fine Arts Department have shown incredible commitment to their missions in the face of these adverse circumstances, innovating at a rapid pace to serve the needs of students. Arts organizations of all sizes and across all artistic disciplines are joining class Zoom meetings and collaborating with HISD teachers, reimagining student programming. The Fine Arts Department has put together a wide range of lessons and partnered with local media to amplify content and ensure students continue to receive arts instruction at home. Fine arts teachers are putting in extra hours to adapt lesson plans to meet individual student needs. In short, our collective is rising to the challenge to ensure that social distancing does not slow the great progress we have made to bring the power of the arts to all HISD students.

Though our collective is strong and our work continues, the economic impacts of COVID-19 are severe. The most acutely impact been felt by our arts organization partners, many of whom find themselves in urgent need of further support. For this reason, this initial report focuses on them.

In our calls, three pressing needs arose again and again for arts organizations:

1. Short-term emergency funds for teaching artists and those out of work
2. Aid to sustain arts organizations through closures
3. Flexible support for innovative program delivery

In what follows, each priority will be discussed in turn, highlighting the specific needs our local arts organization partners shared.

1. Short term emergency funds for teaching artists and those out of work

Teaching artists in Houston have been on the front lines of the COVID-19 impact, losing nearly all their paid work while in-person programming is on hold. The arts organizations we spoke to were, first and foremost worried about the wellbeing of their teaching artists (TAs). The organizations also recognized that without teaching work, TAs might be forced to leave a career in the arts behind, seeking more sustainable employment during a downturn. This will, in turn, reduce the teaching force available



to arts organizations that rely on the expertise that TAs provide and require arts organizations to incur additional expenses to find and train new TAs. This highlights the delicate symbiotic relationship that exists between TAs and arts organizations who provide educational programming. Whenever possible, it will benefit the Houston arts education community to provide direct emergency funds to those who get part or all of their income from teaching artist roles.

As part of its disaster relief efforts, the Houston Arts Alliance is making significant initial headway in advocating for support for individual artists like TAs and will be a great partner for those interested in supporting such needs. Recent federal legislation like the CARES Act also makes increased provisions for workers like TAs, namely through increased unemployment benefits and direct payments to workers. These provisions are only temporary and partial, however. Since nearly all TAs also maintain a professional artistic practice of their own, it is also in the best interest of the city and the Houston arts community to support these artists in this time.

Arts Connect recommends that members of the philanthropic community who are interested in arts education join forces with those who fund the fine arts more broadly and collaboratively design emergency supports for the most vulnerable artists, knowing that doing so will be good both for the arts and culture scene in the city of Houston as well as the future of arts education post-COVID-19.

2. Aid to sustain arts organizations through closures

Most arts organizations that provide arts education here in the city of Houston rely heavily on income from the programs they offer to sustain their work. With COVID-19 shuttering planned spring programs, many of which had already incurred development costs, many organizations are already facing financial troubles and project further losses should closures continue. A few specific examples will help clarify these worries and provide context concerning the operational structures of our partners:

- Two organizations we spoke to feared the loss of their summer camps due to extended closures. Summer camps generate important revenue they need to run low cost programming for underserved schools throughout the year. This is just one example of many sources of earned income that sustains or subsidizes programming.
- Every local organization we spoke to expected to experience some combination of staff, salary, and budget cuts to compensate for revenue lost from cancelled shows and programs. There has also already been a reduction in patron giving, further exacerbating the contractions.
- It is likely that schools will face budget cuts in the coming years due to the unprecedented economic impact of COVID-19. If arts organizations cannot deliver their programming at an affordable rate, it is likely that fewer arts experiences and arts programs will be available to HISD students.

Arts Connect recommends that members of the philanthropic community make resources available to go towards general operating support as well as lost revenue. They may also consider subsidizing arts education programs in schools in the coming years until organizations are able to reestablish their funding streams.



3. Flexible support for innovative program delivery

As mentioned in the first section, our partners have shown incredible resilience and agility in this challenging time, finding ways to stay engaged with their students and with their community. Arts organizations are providing a valuable sense of normalcy and hope to Houstonians and are filling a key need for campus principals and teachers looking for diverse, high quality distance learning opportunities. As such, flexible funding should be provided to support the implementation of these programs. Additionally, by sustaining arts education programming through this time, the importance of education departments in arts organizations (especially those that do not solely provide education) will be further assured and perhaps avoid severe or total budget cuts once operations resume.

The majority of this support will need to be financial, especially given the organizational shortages of capital mentioned in the previous section. However, organizations have also mentioned needs like professional development on education technology and its best practices, collaborative spaces in which to learn from one another as uncharted territory is crossed, and a central organization like Arts Connect to help connect resources to students and community members.

Arts Connect recommends that members of the philanthropic community provide open ended grants to arts organizations seeking to innovate and provide distance learning experiences.

Long Term Considerations

Several of our partners wisely pointed out that the impact of COVID-19 will not cease once schools reopen and stage lights come on once more. The economic impacts of COVID-19 on arts organizations and education programs in Houston will be unprecedented and, even if organizations stay afloat, their operations will be impacted significantly going forward. We heard that it is reasonable to expect shrinking available funds at every level, from national grantmaking organizations to local donors to state dollars that feed into a principal's budget with which to hire new arts teachers or purchase new supplies. For this reason, the Houston arts education ecosystem has a pressing need for funders who can to commit to a long term vision of renewed vitality for the arts education ecosystem of Houston.

While the situation is still taking shape, Arts Connect anticipates that in the long term, the following support will be required to reinvigorate the arts education community:

- Funds to support arts education programs beyond these initial emergency months, especially in organizations and schools that experience tightened budgets
- Local and state advocacy to ensure that funding reaches schools and organizations, including the requisite data on community needs and impact
- Collaborative work to consider more resilient funding streams to sustain arts education work

Arts Connect recommends that members of the philanthropic community who share our commitment to equity and excellence in the arts for all students consider long term support to restore and then fortify the arts education community well into the future. Such an endeavor will be a multi-pronged, systems level approach, and Arts Connect is well positioned to be a thought partner in this.



What Arts Connect is Doing

Arts Connect has already begun making strides to address the needs we heard about from our partners:

- The Arts Action Fund will be made available for online learning programs. Previously granted funds may be used in ways not originally included in the grant, so long as services are going to the intended students.
- We are working to bring a professional development opportunity on the topic of online learning to our partners.
- Arts Connect is serving as a connector between arts organizations that are developing resources and schools that are seeking to fill instructional time with rich materials.
- Our data work has expanded to include a study on the impact of the arts on young people during COVID-19 closures, specifically examining hypothesized benefits through creativity and cultural/community connectedness.
- Arts Connect is developing new advocacy materials to address anticipated reductions to state education budgets. We will join forces with those advocating for adequate resources generally for our young people, as well as seek to specifically ensure that funding for the arts is not lost.
- We are watching federal legislation closely, interpreting key passages for our partners and joining in advocacy when necessary.
- Arts Connect has launched a social media campaign, #HISDCreatingTogether, where students can showcase their artistic work from home.
- Arts Connect is continuously checking in with partners to provide support and resources where most needed.

As we walk this unprecedented path, we are grateful to all our partners for their unwavering commitment to students and our community. Arts Connect would also like to give special thanks to all our partners who took the time to share their perspective with us as we created this report.