

State of Arizona  
Department of Education  
1535 W. Jefferson Street  
Phoenix, AZ 85007

RE: Arizona School Accountability Components & System

To Whom It May Concern:

I am pleased to be writing this letter, on behalf of the Arizona Commission on the Arts, in support of the inclusion of access and participation rates in Arts Education as part of the Arizona Department of Education's A-F Letter Grade Accountability System.

The [Arizona Commission on the Arts](#) is a 49-year-old agency of the State of Arizona and a leading force in the creative and professional development of Arizona's arts sector. Through robust programs, research initiatives and strategic grantmaking, the Arts Commission catalyzes arts-based partnerships that strengthen Arizona communities through the arts, including school communities and other programs that contribute to the success of all Arizona students.

A tremendous body of research stands behind the benefits of Arts Education for students, including improved academic performance, greater leadership and social skills, advanced creative problem-solving skills, and overall enhanced ability to compete in a 21st Century workforce. In addition, there is significant evidence supporting the positive effects of arts programs on a school community, such as improved student attendance and motivation, higher graduation rates, and a child's enhanced sense of belonging.

Based on this body of research, and findings of the [Arizona Arts Education Census](#), in 2014 the Arts Commission invested in a pilot program called Strengthening Schools through Arts Partnerships. Developed in partnership with Arts Education Specialists at the Arizona Department of Education, the funding program supports substantive school/community partnerships that implement initiatives aimed at effecting change in low performing schools (Arizona "D" and "F" label schools) by strengthening teaching and learning in arts education and/or arts integration.

Funded partnerships focused on a number of effective models, but all utilized Arts Education programming to address desired goals and outcomes in support of the school's school improvement plan and/or capacity-building efforts. In a summary analysis of data collected by the funded initiatives in their first two years of programming, three major themes across the programs were found:

1. Academic Achievement

Overall, students who took part in the arts integration or arts education programs performed better academically than the non-participating students. For example, the year one report from

Morgan Maxwell School in Tucson indicated that compared to the students at the control school, the fifth and sixth grade participants in a taiko drumming program showed greater gains in the pre- and post-Galileo mathematics test scores. The following comments were made by teachers at the Morgan Maxwell School:

- *"While that sense of pride and self-discipline was evident in the taiko classroom, some of them carried that feeling through the curriculum. Several of my IEP students made tremendous improvements over this school year."*
- *"Math scores went up dramatically after the fraction lessons. They begin to really understand, and their scores went up on Math tests with this concept."*
- *"When working with fractions and ratios, several students made remarks about the ratios they learned in taiko."*

## 2. Self-Efficacy

Participating students developed self-confidence over time as they learned arts skills in the programs. They learned how to voice their opinions and connect their feelings to their art work through discussion, analysis, exhibition and performance. Quotes from teachers and students in the various initiatives illustrate this:

- A Teaching Artist at Alhambra High School in Phoenix: *"At the start of the semester, many of the students did not really have an idea of what they wanted to say. To help them begin we provided projects with some generic ideas and themes, some of which were taken from the previous year. They had ideas about life and knew what they were passionate about but didn't have the confidence to speak about those things or even how to connect those ideas to art. As they began to learn more and more skills and build trust with the teaching artists, they began to say many deep things about their lives, their stories, and their futures. This was powerful to watch unfold. Their art was meaningful, not simply pretty."*
- A Student at Morgan Maxwell School: *"My experience working with the taiko sensei helped me gain a sense of pride and self-discipline."*
- A Teacher at Morgan Maxwell School: *"Most of my students started the year feeling less than wonderful. Today they are self-confident and so proud of themselves. Taiko helped a great deal in that!"*
- A Teacher at Children First Academy of Phoenix: *"Several students who were timid and not engaged in the academic areas really showed confidence in the artwork and creativity."*
- A Student at Children First Academy of Phoenix: *"I guess today was a good day, but I felt great after the performance. I felt like I was somebody."*

## 3. Student Engagement

Participating students were more engaged in school than prior to their participation in the arts



integration and arts education programs. This is shown in the attendance rates reported by the funded initiatives. For example, both Avondale Middle School in Avondale and Morgan Maxwell School found an increase in attendance rate during the days with the arts integrated classes, and Children First Academy of Phoenix and Alhambra High School reported that the attendance of the students remained constant for the duration of the programs indicating that student attrition was lower than anticipated.

The full summary document, *Cross-Case Evaluation of Recipients of the Arizona Commission on the Arts Grant: Strengthening Schools Through Arts Partnerships, First Cohort 2013-2014 and 2014-2015 school years*, has been included as an attachment to this letter.

As you know, the federal Every Student Succeeds Act, recently signed into law, defines Arts Education (dance, media arts, music, theater and visual arts) as a part of a “well-rounded education” that is the right of every student. While Arizona has taken steps toward strong Arts Education policies, a gap between policy and practice still exists, creating inequity in access to Arts Education. Realizing the full power of Arts Education as a tool for student achievement is dependent on all students in every Arizona school having access to quality Arts Education programs and instruction. The inclusion of Arts Education access and participation rates in the formulae which determine school accountability is a significant way in which our state can work towards realizing this goal for all students.

Thank you for your consideration of this important issue. Should any additional information be desired, please don’t hesitate to call upon the Arizona Commission on the Arts.

Sincerely,

Alexandra Nelson  
Director of Arts Learning  
Arizona Commission on the Arts