



Systems Change in Arts Education

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abstract:

The fifth article in the series *Case-making and Systems Change in Arts and Cultural Education*, expands on the theme of *Advocacy for the Sector*, describing how history has shaped the system of arts education, with a review of the components of our current system. The model acknowledges that we see the larger system and work within a local context, balance organizational structure and flexibility, link communications strategies to goals, build adaptive processes that encourage engagement, understand the dynamics of systems change, and acknowledge progress at all levels. The author proposes new vocabulary to establish Creative Learning at the core of the model, with three sectors (policy, leadership, and philanthropy) that compose the Centers of Influence. The Centers of Influence work to support Creative Learning through various Areas of Impact and Drivers of Change.

keywords:

Systems change, arts ecosystem, creativity, policy, philanthropy, leadership, advocacy, arts education

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As part of our commitment to authentically engaged learning, this article has been formatted to encourage critical dialogue with the text. Throughout, there are numerous spaces to write, draw, or otherwise reflect while reading the text.

Introduction

Systems thinking¹ is often defined as a discipline for seeing wholes rather than parts, acknowledging interconnections among components, and understanding dynamic behavior among unique elements of a system. As it relates to arts education, the larger system is the education and cultural sectors themselves itself, where the interplay of policy, practice, and longstanding norms come face to face with the realities of budget constraints and community values.

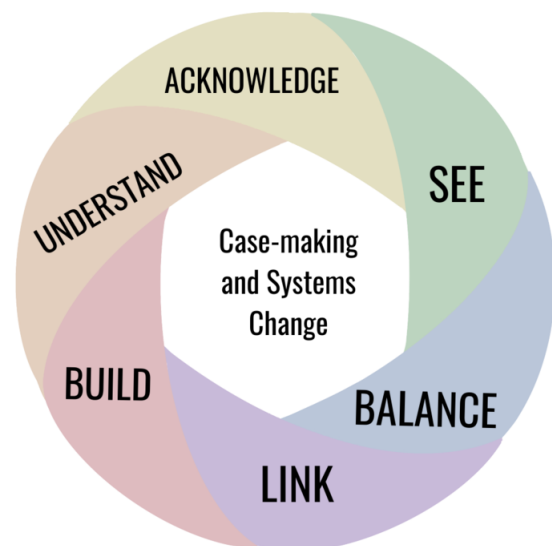
In this fifth article in the series *Case-making and Systems Change in Arts and Cultural Education*, I expand on the theme of *Advocacy for the Sector*, describing how history has shaped the system of arts education, with a review of the components of our current system.

This article proposes a new systems model of arts and cultural education in

¹ Systems thinking is a practice that recognizes interconnections, identifies and understands feedback, understands how system structures facilitate behavior, acknowledges the variability and flow of assets (such as funding or leadership), and understands dynamic behavior (Arnold, 2015, pp 676-679).

an attempt to understand the sectors, influence, supports, and drivers of change. Please note: I recognize that creative learning happens both inside and outside of the school day; I also recognize that most of the public policies which have historically inhibited arts and cultural education are K-12, formal education policies, thus this model specifically looks at systems change regarding K-12 arts education in a formal education setting.

In the introductory article in this series, I shared the below diagram which encapsulates the variety of lenses representing key concepts which emerge from the research.



As practitioners, we may view these as guideposts to enhance our experience and effectiveness as advocates:

- See the larger system and work within a local context
- Balance organizational structure and flexibility
- Link communications strategies to goals
- Build adaptive processes that encourage engagement
- Understand the dynamics of systems change
- Acknowledge progress at all levels

In the following article, I will be focusing on seeing the larger picture and understanding the dynamics of systems change.

Historical Context

Arts education in public schools exists in a complex system that is unlike other subject areas. Even though the arts remained one of the core academic subjects, when high stakes testing was introduced with 2001 *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB), many schools placed greater emphasis and resources on the tested subjects, such as reading and math. In many school districts, maintaining viable arts programs

required a complex support system of non-school sources such as private philanthropy, teaching artists, and nonprofit arts organizations. School districts with limited funding were faced with a tough decision based on scarce resources between tested subjects (reading/math) and non-tested subjects, including the arts. Too often, districts with high per pupil spending could “afford” the arts, while those with low per pupil spending were forced to narrow the curriculum in favor of tested subjects. This created greater gaps between wealthy and under-resourced districts, and greater disparities in access to the arts, often with differences between schools within the same district.

The 2015 *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA) marked a victory with the inclusion of music and the arts as part of an expanded definition of “well rounded education.” It also brought a greater emphasis on local control, giving school districts and schools much greater autonomy over what is taught – and it eliminated the previous emphasis on testing.

NCLB and ESSA have given rise to efforts to close the access gap with public value campaigns, research on the benefits of the arts in education, community partnerships, and targeted advocacy and lobbying, all in an attempt to influence public opinion and policy at the local, state, and national levels. In this article, we look at understanding the complex arts education system and identifying levers that lead to change.

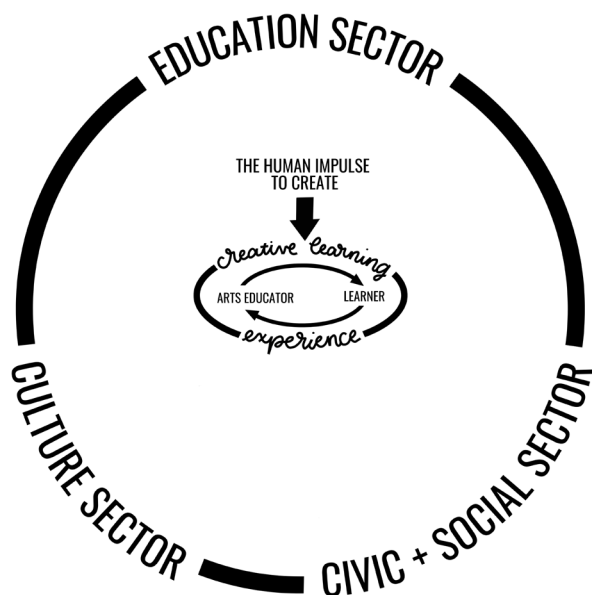
The arts education landscape, or ecosystem, is well described in the *Arts Education Field Guide* from Americans for the Arts. It is depicted as concentric circles of stakeholders, each with responsibility and accountability, with the students holding center stage.

In response to the increased collaboration among in- and out-of-school stakeholders, through a pedagogical approach called arts integration, a coalition of national arts education service organizations produced "Arts Education for America's Students: A Shared Endeavor," which articulates the unique role and contribution of arts educators, non-arts educators, and community arts partners in service of a holistic arts education.

In the *Declaration of Equity in Music for City Students* from Yale University, "ecosystem is a network of interacting individuals, communities, and systems in which diverse elements are balanced and thrive. A music ecosystem, then, is the network of music-making people, places, and systems that characterize a city's music and cultural life."

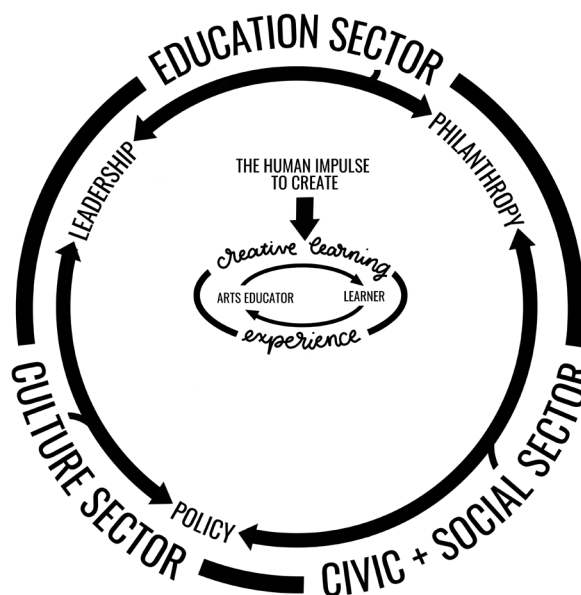
Components of Systems Thinking

Creative Learning at the Core



The human impulse to create is the force that drives creative learning. It is the overarching societal outcome that drives the model. From the earliest cave paintings to TikTok videos, humans express their humanity in creative ways. *Creative Learning Experiences* are the heart of the model. *Arts Educators* and *Learners* are the lifeblood of creative learning, where the magic of teaching and learning happen. *Creative Learning Experiences* are supported by three sectors — *Education*, *Cultural*, and *Civic + Social*. It is the interaction and engagement of these sectors that offer opportunities for advocates to make an impact.

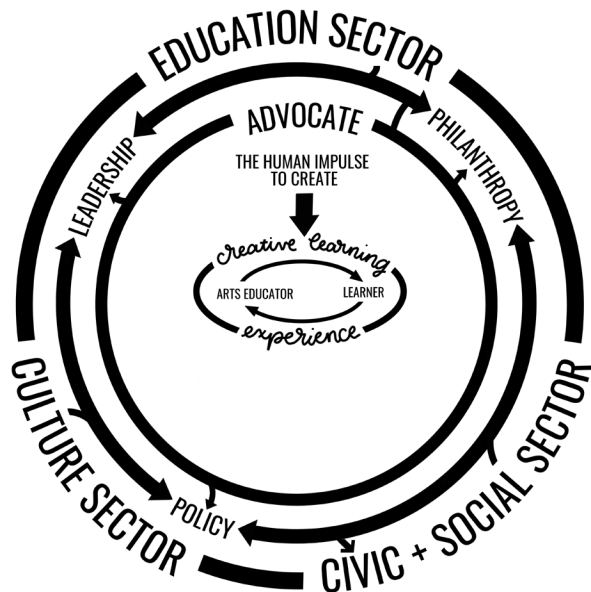
Centers of Influence



Within the three sectors are centers of influence that impact creative learning experiences:

- *Policy*: Local, state, and national policies influence both what is taught in the public schools and budgetary allocations.
- *Leadership*: School board members, school administrators, and elected officials influence the provision of creative learning through policies, procedures, and financial support.
- *Philanthropy*: Foundations, corporations, and individuals influence creative learning experiences through outright and leveraged gifts.

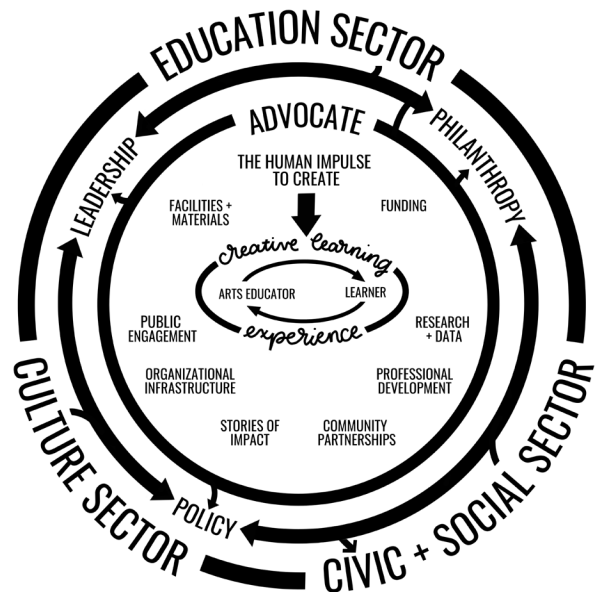
Drivers of Change



Advocates hold a very special place in the systems map. It is important to note that directional arrows in the map travel both ways. Ultimately, the *Centers of Influence* – Policy, Leadership, and Philanthropy – are influenced by and influence the desired outcomes.

Advocates – be they practitioner, field builder, or policy advocates – are the drivers of change. They utilize *Public Engagement* and *Research/Data* to generate stories of impact that will in turn influence (and are influenced by) *Policy*, *Philanthropy*, and *Leadership*. We describe the system so that we can change it.

Areas of Impact

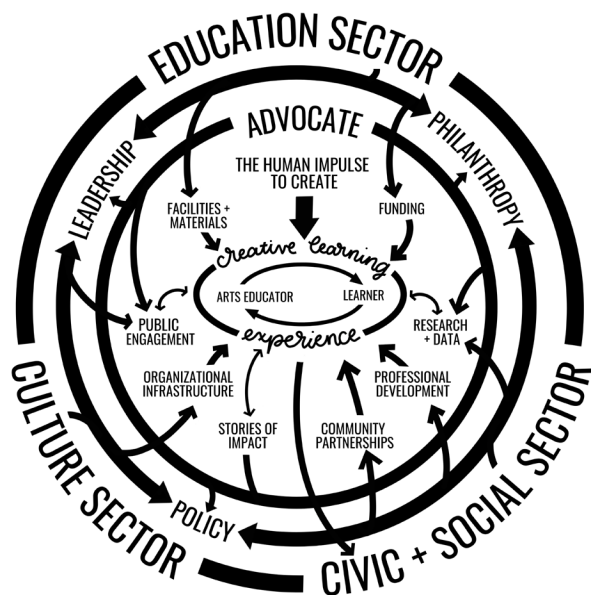


Centers of Influence support creative learning in one or more Areas of Impact:

- *Funding* for any of the areas listed below.
- *Research and Data* that provide baseline data and highlights possible inequities.
- *Professional Development* to ensure quality teaching.
- *Community Partnerships* that enrich and enhance school programs.
- *Organizational Infrastructure* such as dedicated staffing, to support educators and students.
- *Public Engagement* such as public will campaigns, to amplify the value and benefits.

- *Facilities and Materials* to provide adequate instructional materials, equipment, and facilities that serve all youth.

See Yourself in the System



We can be effective change agents regardless of where we are on the systems map. Guiding questions to get started:

1. As an Advocate, with which areas are you most closely aligned?
 - a. Sector (Education, Cultural, Civic + Social)
 - b. Center of Influence (Leadership, Philanthropy, Policy)
 - c. Area of Impact (Funding, Research/Data, Professional Development, Community Partnerships, Organizational Infrastructure, Public Engagement, Facilities/Materials)

2. As an Advocate, what is your preferred Driver of Change method (advocacy actions) that will lead to influence and improved Creative Learning outcomes?
 - a. Public Engagement
 - b. Research
 - c. Stories of Impact

3. As you review the systems map, identify people in your community who fill roles in the Centers of Influence? Who is active in the Areas of Impact? Who are the community partners? Funders? Research partners? Policy experts? Education decision makers?

4. What do you want to accomplish? How will you collaborate across Centers of Influence and Areas of Impact? How will you reach out to others in your community to influence change? For example, an educator might collaborate with a researcher to better communicate the impact of the arts on student learning. A policy expert might provide a briefing to school board members that sheds light on an issue of inequality.

There is no magic formula for systems change. Systems change work is iterative; it can start from anywhere within the system. It is dynamic and fluid, with actions, influence, and outcomes moving in multiple directions.

References:

Arnold, Ross D., and Jon P. Wade. "A definition of systems thinking: A systems approach." *Procedia computer science* 44 (2015): 669-678.



Creative Generation believes that youth create change. We are a values-driven global collective that collaborates with young creatives and those who cultivate their creativity to take local actions towards global changes in pursuit of a more just world. Founded in 2019, Creative Generation operates five signature programs: The Campaign for a Creative Generation, the Institute for Creative Social Transformation,

The Academy for Creative Leadership, the Incubator for Creative Impact, and the Foundation for a Creative Generation. www.Creative-Generation.org

The Creative Generation Journal aims to create a scholarly space to amplify the voices of young creatives and practitioners who catalyze social transformation and document and disseminate promising cultural, education, and social change practices which cultivate creativity in youth.

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Laurie Schell (she/her) serves as the Senior Specialist for Content and Training with a focus on case making and systems change. In this role, she contributes to specific projects related to professional development and curriculum development.

Laurie is founding principal of Laurie Schell Associates | ElevateArtsEd, providing consulting services and issue expertise in arts education. Widely recognized for leadership in the nonprofit and education sectors, Laurie Schell has worked to foster arts education through strategic alliances and partnerships, policy and advocacy campaigns, innovative programs, directed research, and mobilizing constituencies for action.

Ms. Schell served as the the inaugural director of Music Makes Us (2012-2017), the public/private music education initiative in Metro Nashville Public Schools, jointly supported by the mayor's office, music industry, and the school district. During her tenure, participation in music increased to over 60% of the K-12 student population. Forty-five classes were added in 18 schools, with over \$5 million raised in private and government funds to augment district funding.

Previously, Ms. Schell was the executive director of the California Alliance for Arts Education (2001 – 2011), where she led a successful campaign to secure a historic \$605

million investment in K-12 arts education, co-edited numerous policy papers, and co-created the Insider's Guide to Arts Education Planning, now in its 3rd edition.

Ms. Schell holds a B.A. from Stanford University, an M.A. in Liberal Studies/ Dance from Wesleyan University in Connecticut and pursued further studies at the Harvard Kennedy School of Government. She currently serves on the board of Save the Music Foundation and ArtsEd Tennessee, a statewide advocacy coalition.