



## Making the Case for Social Justice

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### abstract:

The term "social justice" is commonly referenced as the objective of creating a fair and equal society, with equitable distribution of wealth, opportunities, and privileges, where individual rights are recognized and protected, and decisions are made in ways that are fair and honest. To realize the principles of social justice in and through arts and cultural education, the author considers practical considerations for social justice through the following areas: access and participation, board development, teacher recruitment, and curriculum development.

### keywords:

social justice, curriculum reform, board development, teacher recruitment, inclusion, diversity

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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.*

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## Introduction

The theme of justice is embedded throughout *Case-making and Systems Change for Arts and Cultural Education*, specifically related to the delivery of equitable access to arts and cultural education through the many layers of civic participation and public policy. As we learn how better to advocate for ourselves, the field, and the larger arts and culture sector, we become part of a societal movement to achieve change for the greater good. However, there is a deeper layer beyond just the 'fairness' of allocating resources or providing access – we must think deeper about social justice *in* arts and cultural education, and *through* arts and cultural education.

The term *social justice* is commonly referenced as the objective of creating a fair and equal society, with equitable distribution of wealth, opportunities, and privileges, where individual rights are recognized and protected, and decisions are made in ways sustainable. Further, it grapples with the long-standing inequities in our

societies and how we acknowledge the need for change and reconcile with our histories.

## Pathways to Consider

To realize the principles of social justice in arts and cultural education, consider focusing your work in one of the following areas that require sustained attention: access and participation, board development, teacher recruitment, and curriculum development.

### Arts access and participation

According to the recent U.S. Census, a more accurate profile of the how people self-identify. In a posting from the U.S Census Bureau on the 2020 Census, the report states, "The Multiracial population has changed considerably since 2010. It was measured at 9 million people in 2010 and is now 33.8 million people in 2020, a 276% increase" (Jones, et al, 2021). This presents a huge opportunity for artists, cultural institutions and schools, with greater chances for a more nuanced understanding of our humanity and deeper expressions of

our stories of origin. If we agree that equitable access to and participation in the arts is part of a larger social justice goal and that communities of color typically have less access and therefore fewer opportunities for participation, then it is clear we have work to do.

### **Nonprofit boards of directors**

In a 2013 study, authored by Francie Ostrower (2013), of over 438 arts and cultural organizations, findings show a remarkable homogeneity in board makeup. "On average, 91% of board members were White, 4% were Black, 2% were Hispanic... Fully 58.7% of the boards had only White, non-Hispanic members." Even when organizations serve a diverse audience, boards are disproportionately White relative to their own audiences.

We may be seeing a shift towards greater board diversity, though there is still much to do. In a recent study, author Young-Joo Lee (2021) finds "the racial diversity of arts organizations' governing boards is positively associated with a shift in organizational priorities, from privately oriented goals to publicly oriented ones. Board diversity has been advocated as a means of

improving nonprofits' performance in various areas, including fundraising, financial success, and nonfinancial performance."

### **Teacher development and recruitment**

A career guidance site Zippia provides a demographic analysis for many careers, including teachers in the arts (dance, music, theatre, visual arts). Although the data does not distinguish between K-12 certified teachers and those teaching outside of a school setting, it is instructive nonetheless. In each arts discipline over 70% of teachers are White except for dance (66%). Given what we know about the demographics of a changing America, we might assume that the students of these teachers are more diverse than their teachers. Like governing boards, arts teachers are disproportionately White relative to their students.

This disparity has many implications for the teacher recruitment pathway: from college-going high school seniors to higher education admissions, support for students in their field of study, teacher recruitment and hiring protocols, and teacher retention and support practices.

## Curriculum development

Recent events have triggered a wide array of diversity, equity and inclusion statements and training in the arts & culture and education fields. Progress in this area has been gradual though halting at times.

The arts curriculum—what is taught in the classroom (in school as well as outside of a school setting) — is an area where advocates can take local, immediate steps as well as working toward broader policy outcomes.

As an advocate, be sensitive to the political context of your community.

While some states and school districts are putting constraints on curriculum that addresses historical social inequities, others are embracing the moment with a new awareness of equity and social justice. As an educator, look for opportunities to embrace diversity, including more inclusive song selection for concerts, highlighting non-Western artistic genres, partnerships between schools and BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) artists, and deeper study of the cultural richness of master artists, all leading toward a

more inclusive conversation about humanity as experienced through artistic practice.

## Through the Lens of Social Justice

Overlaying the everyday work in arts and cultural education can be a social justice lens. Whether you are designing a curriculum, recruiting board members or teachers, or accessing participation data, ask yourself:

- How are my actions consistent with the desire to achieve equity and inclusion?
- In what ways do my actions address issues of inequality?
- In what ways do I utilize creative learning processes to advance my work?
- In what ways do I seek conversations outside of my usual network?
- How have I utilized peers or mentors to help guide my thinking and actions?
- In what ways do I see myself in this work?
- In what ways might I engage in advocacy differently?

- How will I continue my commitment to the work of social justice through arts advocacy?

As noted in the introductory article making the case for systemic change in and through arts and cultural education is multifaceted. As with the artistic process, so, too, the *process* of advocacy engagement is as important as the final *product* or outcomes. The work is dynamic and iterative, unfolding as we engage in the process.

Bring your best creative self to the work. Who better than artists and educators to lead our society into new ways of solving old problems?

*"If you don't stretch, you won't know where the edge is."*

Sarah Little Turnbull, American product designer (1917-2015)

Inspired the design for the N95 mask.

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*The Academy for Creative Leadership, the Incubator for Creative Impact, and the Foundation for a Creative Generation. [www.Creative-Generation.org](http://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.