

DATE: February 12, 2025

TO: Members of the Senate Committee on Education

FROM: Susan Evans McClure, Executive Director, Vermont Arts Council

RE: The Vermont Arts Council and Arts Education

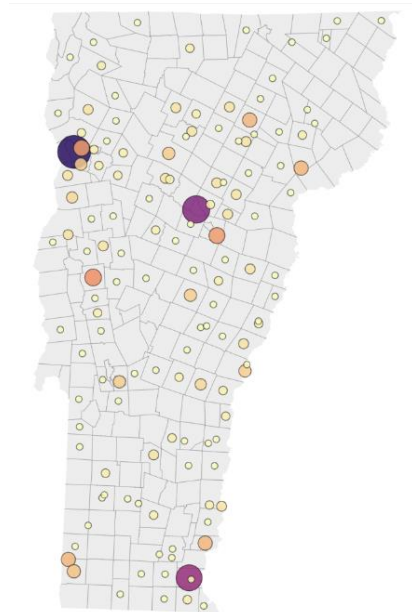


Organizational Background

The Vermont Arts Council is the state's arts agency, and the state affiliate of the National Endowment for the Arts. Our mission is to cultivate and advance the arts and creativity throughout Vermont. We are working to build a state where artists thrive, where creativity is at the heart of our communities, and where everyone has access to the arts in their lives and education.

The Arts Council works primarily as grantmakers, conveners, advocates, and storytellers:

- *Grantmakers:* We invest private, state, and federal funding in the arts through a transparent process that supports artists, arts organizations, arts education, and community building
- *Conveners:* We bring people together to learn, connect, and advance the arts.
- *Advocates:* We raise awareness and work to increase local, state, and federal support for the arts and creativity in our lives and communities.
- *Storytellers:* We are the state's trusted source for information and resources that support and grow Vermont's creative sector. We tell the story of the rich complexity of the arts and creativity in Vermont.



In FY24, the Arts Council awarded \$3,247,415 in funding. Grants were awarded to 131 individuals and 235 organizations and businesses in all of Vermont's fourteen counties. Over the past 5 years, we were able to fund only 45% of the applications that we have received. There continues to be greater demand for these resources than we have the capacity to support.

Grants directly support artists to create new work and deepen their practice, support communities to create public art connected with infrastructure projects, support educators to provide arts education to students in school settings, support arts organizations to add vibrancy to Vermont communities through projects that provide equal and abundant access to the arts, and much more.

The Council also administers two grant programs on behalf of the state of Vermont- the Cultural Facilities grant program and the Art in State Buildings Program. Cultural Facilities grants help Vermont nonprofit organizations and municipalities enhance, create, or expand the capacity of an existing building to provide cultural activities for the public. This is one of the few programs in the state that directly supports the physical infrastructure needed to create arts experiences for our communities. The Art in State Buildings program commissions Vermont artists to create public art as part of BGS construction projects in new or existing state buildings.

The Vermont Arts Council is the only state arts agency in the country that operates as an independent nonprofit. We are a quasi-state agency, created in statute in 1965 (we are marking our 60th anniversary this year!). The Council receives the majority of its revenue (80-90%) from two sources: the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) and the state of Vermont. The NEA requires that state governments match the federal dollars allocated to state arts agencies, dollar for dollar. Our General Fund allocation, therefore, enables the Arts Council to secure substantial federal funds each year that are distributed to organizations, schools, and communities in all areas of the state.

Vermont Arts Council Arts Education Support

Learning in and through the arts is vital to living fulfilled, whole lives. Arts education experiences help us understand and enrich our lives, each other, and our communities.

The Vermont Arts Council is working to increase access to arts education statewide through support of:

- **Early Childhood Arts Partnership Grants** provide early education programs with direct opportunities to think, create, and learn through the arts, helping children gain an appreciation for the arts and be better prepared for school.
- **Artists in Schools Grants** fund quality, multi-day arts experiences in schools with Vermont teaching artists in residence and encourage collaborations between schools, youth, artists, and arts organizations. Residencies may take place during the school day or in a sequential, after-school setting.
- **Creative Aging Grants** support organizations in providing skill-based activities that engage older adults in artistic creation and intentional social engagement. The Council maintains a Creative Aging Teaching Artist Roster of specially trained artists skilled in designing highly engaging programs.
- **Teaching Artist Roster and trainings:** The Council maintains a Teaching Artist Roster, a juried directory with active and experienced Vermont teaching artists available for arts and arts-integrated educational activities in schools and community-based settings. Additionally, the Council offers ongoing Teaching Artist Trainings through the Idea Exchange series.

The Impact of Arts Education on Students and Communities

In the 2024 [Vermont Poll](#), an annual statistically representative, statewide survey of Vermont residents, **87% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that arts and culture are an important part of K-12 education in Vermont.**

There are many positive benefits for students and communities, including a demonstrated economic return on investing in arts education and an increase in graduation rates for students who participate in arts education. But most importantly, arts learning experiences help students to understand themselves and communicate about who they are to the world. All of the educational outcome data in the world cannot fully explain the look on a student's face when they see their artwork on display, or when they come offstage after their first performance, or when they read their poem aloud to the class.

Our work funding arts education programs expands the world for Vermont students and allows them to grow in new ways. A science and dance integrated residency with artists Ashley Hensel-Browing at Grafton Elementary School culminated in a performance for the entire school community. Vanessa Stern, the classroom teacher for the residency said:

I was surprised by the depth of understanding this project supported, not only about our woods ecosystems, but about themselves as a community of learners.... One student had adamantly refused to participate. He was terrified to read his poem out loud and to perform the dance in front of an audience.... But when the day of the performance came, he told me that if I read his poem (which is quite beautiful!) out loud, he would participate in the dance. Which he did with all he could muster. I knew how scared he was, but he didn't let his peers down. He was fully present for his parts of the performance. We also have another student who has a range of physical disabilities and developmental delays that make it difficult for him to participate in some of our activities. His mother was moved to tears when she saw him fully participate in the dance pieces. And, as a para-educator supported him to read his poem, he was able to read it out loud in front of the audience. His mother was moved to tears and told us she had no idea he was actually going to read in front of an audience.

The arts nurture vital skills for students:

- The arts build well-rounded individuals, broaden our understanding of the world, support social and emotional development, and help build empathy and generate acceptance of others.
- Arts education provides opportunities for students to create, explore, reflect, express themselves, and actively engage in their learning experiences.
- Arts exposure improves students' critical thinking, writing achievement, compassion for others, and increases students' motivation to engage in cultural activities.

- Arts participation has been shown to have causal impacts on both math and writing achievement. Research also shows that schools offering robust arts opportunities do so without negative impacts to state-assessed educational outcomes such as language and mathematics.

The arts reach students at risk of slipping through the cracks.

- There are consistent positive effects on student attendance as a result of students taking arts courses. These effects are notably stronger for students who have a history of chronic absenteeism.
- Underserved students demonstrate more-pronounced, positive impacts from school sponsored arts exposure, suggesting that the arts, as an intervention, reduces gaps in educational outcomes.

Arts education strengthens our communities

- When schools have more students taking arts courses, teachers report significant improvements in student and parent engagement
- Community partnerships through the arts positively impact students' understanding of other cultures and history, career-related exploration and skill development, and community and civic engagement.

Supporting Arts Education in Vermont Schools

In all of the discussion around school and education funding reform in Vermont, it is vital to keep arts education at the center of student experiences. A [recent op-ed in VT Digger by the Vermont Music Educators and Vermont Arts Educators Associations](#) outlined 3 steps that Vermont's education leaders should take now to ensure that all students have access to the arts learning that both improves their overall learning outcomes and allows them to connect with their truest selves.

1. **Conduct a statewide assessment.** Gather data on the current state of arts education in Vermont, including program availability and staffing levels.
2. **Establish a clear promise.** Commit to a minimum standard for K-12 arts education — a guarantee of meaningful, consistent access to visual arts, music, theater and dance.
3. **Update the education quality standards.** Revise the standards to include enforceable benchmarks for arts education, ensuring cuts are only allowed when programs are excessive, not foundational.

The Vermont Arts Council supports these efforts to ensure equitable and sustainable arts education for all Vermont students. The arts are for everyone.