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NEW STUDY EXAMINES SOCIOEMOTIONAL BENEFITS OF ARTS EDUCATION

William Penn Foundation Commissioned Study Creates a New Mandate for Arts Education

PHILADELPHIA (April 19, 2017) – Today, the William Penn Foundation released the findings of a new study, *The Socioemotional Benefits of the Arts: A New Mandate for Arts Education*, at a convening that explored the role of arts education in the development of young people. The William Penn Foundation engaged WolfBrown, a leading arts and arts education research firm, to evaluate a cohort of the Foundation’s arts education grantees working across art forms in partnership with elementary, middle, and high schools throughout Philadelphia.

Socioemotional learning (SEL) includes the development of critical human capacities like self-control, effective decision-making, maintaining a positive self-image, and constructive and empathetic interactions with others. Previous research makes it clear that developing these abilities is fundamental for children’s well-being, their success in school, and in life. What has been missing, up until now, is a clear understanding of the role that the arts could play in fueling this kind of growth.

This is an urgent, not just an interesting, question – particularly at a time when, as a nation, we face widening gaps in income that often have harsh effects on families with children. Poverty shrinks children’s opportunities for socioemotional learning by reducing their access to quality early education, safe outdoor spaces for free play, cross-age afterschool activities, and arts programs in and out of school. “Equity is an underlying principle in the Foundation’s funding, and this study reinforces the importance of investing in arts education for the equitable distribution of educational opportunity, especially for Philadelphia’s under-resourced communities,” said Shawn McCaney, Executive Director for the William Penn Foundation. “In undertaking this study, we wanted to fill an information gap about how arts education can improve the lives of a diverse set of students. With this new data, we have a better understanding of how arts education contributes to positive outcomes in school and in life.”

Expanding on this point, Dennie Palmer Wolf and Steven Holochwost, the study’s primary researchers, added, “Many studies of the benefits of arts education are conducted with homogeneous populations who already have multiple opportunities to build socioemotional skills. But with funding from the Foundation, and the cooperation of Philadelphia’s schools and cultural organizations, we had the rare chance to ask the question, ‘How can the arts foster socioemotional development for children who have the greatest needs?’ The findings build a powerful argument for the public value of the arts.”

Among the findings of the study are the following:

Programs Spark Interest in the Arts

The study found that across a diverse set of programs and students served, the one universal result was that participation in arts education programs led to increases in students’ interest in the arts.

Younger Students Benefit Most

The findings also showed that arts education was more strongly related to socioemotional outcomes in younger students. Elementary school children who participated in arts education programs showed growth over children without these same opportunities across multiple areas of socioemotional learning. These included: tolerance for others' perspectives, growth mindset (i.e., the understanding that their abilities and knowledge can develop through hard work), and achievement motivation.

Arts Education Can Be a Positive Disruptor of Disengagement

Finally, across all ages, students with high scores in certain areas of socioemotional development were more likely to retain those scores if they received arts education. This is true for their levels of school engagement and the students' belief in their ability to succeed academically. For example, students who reported high levels of school engagement prior to participating in an arts program maintained their high levels of engagement. However, students who had similar initial levels of engagement, but did not participate in an arts program demonstrated sharp decreases in school engagement. Thus, access to arts education emerges as an important factor, not only for artistic learning but also supporting and encouraging socioemotional growth that can contribute to long-term success.

In addition to its basic research findings, the study suggests new ways to evaluate programs and define success based on a better understanding of the link between arts education programs and socioemotional learning. [The report can be viewed here.](#)

"With a better understanding of the connection between arts education and socioemotional development, the Foundation is better positioned to make investments that create positive impacts for students now and in the future," continued McCaney.

About the William Penn Foundation

The William Penn Foundation, founded in 1945 by Otto and Phoebe Haas, is dedicated to improving the quality of life in the Greater Philadelphia region through efforts that increase educational opportunities for children from low-income families, ensure a sustainable environment, foster creativity that enhances civic life, and advance philanthropy in the Philadelphia region. In partnership with others, the Foundation works to advance opportunity, ensure sustainability, and enable effective solutions. Since inception, the Foundation has made nearly 10,000 grants totaling over \$1.6 billion. The Foundation's assets exceed \$2.3 billion as of March 31, 2016.

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