



Something is Happening in Chula Vista

In 2017, the California Alliance for Arts Education (now Create CA) set out to explore the effects of arts education on creativity, student engagement and social emotional learning in a Southern California district that had committed significant financial, staffing and planning resources to arts education. The results of this investigation highlight the complex relationship between the impact of the arts and the environment in which students are learning and living. A host of current research points to an increasing state of emotional crisis and anxiety among America's students, due to fears of school violence and immigration concerns (Noam, 2018; Brabeck, Sibley et al 2015). This heightened anxiety has been shown to impact student performance and behavior in multiple ways, from interfering with memory retrieval to decreased flexibility in learning patterns, to feelings of isolation and detachment (Vogel & Schwabe, 2016). Our conversations with the district superintendent, staff, teachers, and parents over the last two years, in combination with the research study, confirmed a belief that their school and community environment was also impacted by anxiety and crisis. **The arts investment over the last four years has, in fact, been posed by the superintendent as a remedy to address the fundamental needs of students impacted by trauma.**

A careful and patient study of the research data supports this belief. Understanding those results required us to be open to a more complex understanding of the research environment and the challenges it created for learning. In this brief we will explain the story we came to tell in Chula Vista, what we discovered in almost two years of research, and how the data have led to conclusions that speak to the conditions not only in Chula Vista but across the state and country.

WHY WE WENT TO CHULA VISTA

Chula Vista Elementary School District sits at the border between Mexico and California. It is the largest elementary school district in California, with a population of 34% English language learners and 52% students of poverty. In 2015, their school board voted to invest \$15 million over three years to hire visual and performing arts teachers to provide sequential, standards-based arts education to every child in the district during the school day. The investment has continued in successive district budgets.

Chula Vista, like many other districts around the state, chose to eliminate their arts programs in order to keep up with the demands of high stakes testing. By 2010, there were only a few part-time arts teachers sprinkled throughout the district.

Dr. Francisco Escobedo, the district superintendent and a former law enforcement officer, believed that the arts might be a transformative solution to many of the crises his students were facing – trauma, housing and food insecurity, language barriers, possible family deportation. This conclusion was based on the impact of the district's experience with the Community Opus Project, an after-school orchestra program which brought music instruction into schools where there was none. After the passing of California's Local Control Funding Formula law in 2013, Dr. Escobedo worked with the school board to leverage the need for teacher collaboration time to dedicate funds to hiring credentialed Visual and Performing Arts (VAPA) teachers who could teach during that collaborative planning time. The arts education initiative born of this process would ultimately see the hiring of over 90 full-time visual and performing arts teachers into the district. Some schools that had no arts three years previously now had weekly or biweekly arts instruction in multiple disciplines. They built orchestras. They staged plays. They created murals.

Teachers reported that students loved coming to school on the days they had art or music class. Parents flooded to school events that included an artistic performance. Teachers eagerly participated in professional training for arts integration – an instructional philosophy that teaches traditional classroom subjects in tandem with an arts discipline – led by community arts partners from organizations across San Diego County. It was a rich and vibrant undertaking.



THE RESEARCH PROJECT

In our research, we wanted to investigate if students who participated in multiple tiers of arts education (sequential standards-based arts education and/or arts integration) show growth in the areas of engagement, social emotional learning, and creativity. We contracted an experienced researcher, Dr. Ivonne Chand O’Neal of MUSE Research, and partnered with the district to conduct a pilot research study in four schools of similar sizes and demographics, but with varying levels of arts participation. The research team met intensively with district and school leaders, teachers and parents to talk about the study and why we thought it was important. Over the course of the 2018-19 academic year, the team administered pre- and post-test survey instruments around creativity, student engagement, and social emotional learning to teachers, parents, and students.

A COMMUNITY IN CRISIS

In our meetings with the school community, the complex reality of students’ lived experience was ever-present. Housing and food insecurity made school attendance a challenge for many students. Demanding hourly wage jobs kept attendance low at parent meetings and school events.

The more we engaged with the community, the more we realized that the study results could not be fully understood without considering the broader context of the school environment. Instead of learning simply how the arts impacted creativity, student engagement and social emotional learning, we were really learning what level of arts intervention could counteract the effects of trauma and support student efforts to be successful in school.

WHAT THE NUMBERS TELL US

The demographics of all four participating schools were similar. The student bodies were majority Hispanic, with some variation in other ethnic identities. A majority of participating parents reported their highest level of education attained as high school or below. All of the schools qualified for Title I funding. However, while all four schools participating in the study had at least one full-time arts teacher, the frequency and variety of arts experiences and the number of years’ experience at the schools varied widely. At the time of the study, School A, for example, had only two years of sequential standards-based arts learning and no arts integration experience, while School D had four years of sequential standards-based arts learning and fully implemented arts integration under its belt. Schools B and C had some experience of both sequential standards-based arts learning and arts integration.



Our central research hypothesis was that student perceptions of their own creativity, engagement, and social emotional learning would increase at each school according to the level of discipline-based arts instruction and arts integration implemented. Of the four schools, only School D – the school with the longest and greatest intensity of arts experiences – had students self-report increases in aspects of creativity, student engagement, and social emotional learning.

In engagement and creativity measures, the students reported increases in engagement and interest, cognitive flexibility and ideational behavior. In social emotional learning, they reported increases in emotional control and empathy. Cognitive flexibility, in particular, has been correlated with higher test scores (Chand O’Neal, 2017). And emotional control and empathy are powerful tools for surviving unpredictable circumstances and building healthy relationships within a school community (Brehm, Doll, 2008; Armstrong, Galligan & Critchley, 2011).

Of the four schools, School D has the highest percentage of students living in poverty, the highest number of students experiencing housing insecurity and food insecurity, and the highest number of English language learners. They were living with trauma. And yet their perception of their own progress showed an upward trend. While this was a pilot study, there is strong evidence that the length of time that students participated in arts education, along with the intensity of exposure to both high quality discipline-based arts education and arts integration, made a difference in positive student perceptions of their own development.

At School D, the fourth and fifth grade students participating in the study were actively engaged in discipline-based arts education and arts integration for four years, since the very beginning of the school district’s investment. In addition to having instruction from highly qualified, credentialed discipline-based arts teachers, the students also worked with classroom teachers who had been trained in arts integration and benefitted from partnerships with community arts partners providing hands-on instruction for both students and teachers. The school had time to plan, troubleshoot, and commit to the programs and schedules that worked best for their students, and to create an environment where students were surrounded by the arts.

At Schools A, B, and C, where students had moderate or minimal disciplined-based arts education over a shorter period of time, the experience was enough to build a sense of positive impact among teachers – teachers at all four schools reported an increase in creativity, engagement, and social emotional learning among their students. For the students, the numbers still point to a probable upward trend – there was less decline in student perception of creativity, engagement and social emotional learning in the schools that had moderate as opposed to minimal discipline-based arts instruction and arts integration – but the data clearly state that more time and more intensity, such as occurred at School D, lead to the most positive results for students. (For a detailed description of the levels of arts instruction at each school and a full analysis of the results, please see the final report at www.artsed411.org).



REFLECTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

We know that trauma compromises learning and decreases student capacity to absorb and retain learning. The investment that Chula Vista has made in arts education to counteract that trauma has been not just a financial commitment but a commitment to transform the ways students learn and teachers teach. The real impact of hiring over 90 full-time, credentialed discipline-based arts teachers, partnering with over 20 community arts partners, and providing a host of professional development opportunities is just beginning to show its true impact four years later.

But trauma is stubborn, unpredictable, and unrelenting, and truly combatting its effects takes time. As we see from the study, some small improvements can be seen after one to two years of introductory discipline-based learning and arts integration, but the real positive impact only starts to show after four years of consistent exposure. In the world of school policy and school funding, four years is an eternity, and arts education, in spite of mounting research evidence as to its positive impact, is still vulnerable. The results of our pilot study are promising, but more research over a longer time period could provide even more data about student impact and improvement.

For such research to take place, we need schools to be able to have arts programs in place for longer than an experimental program and partnership. We need school district administrators to have the backing and support they need to keep making the bold choices that are happening in Chula Vista, so that a virtuous cycle of evidence-based research and evidence-supported programs can continue to thrive and grow.

The research tells us that **quality** – experienced, credentialed arts teachers and vetted, well-designed community programs – plus **sustainability** – multi-year commitments to programs that give teachers time to plan and learn and incorporate new learning – are key to the kind of success we are seeking. We need to continue to ask for investment at the highest level in both research and school funding, and to demand that our most vulnerable students receive the high-quality arts education that they deserve.

The full research report from the pilot study will be available at www.CreateCA.org.

A short film about Chula Vista's transformative investment in the arts, also called *Something is Happening in Chula Vista*, is also available [here](#).

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