

THE ART OF LEARNING

Photo by PemLive

The Heinz Endowments' Creative Learning initiative is helping to connect youth in the Pittsburgh region with arts and cultural organizations while supporting professional development for teaching artists to cultivate future generations of artists and arts audiences.
By Julia Fraser

Pink and orange streamers hang down from the historic domed ceiling that once housed the old Allegheny Post Office.

This installation artwork — “More Light” by artist and architect Dick Esterle — loomed over the Children’s Museum of Pittsburgh’s studio as children worked on projects inspired by neo-expressionist artist Jean-Michel Basquiat and made their own screen prints next to original prints by Pittsburgh native pop artist Andy Warhol that hung at their eye-level.

The future artists played next to masterworks.

“We’re committed to adaptive reuse and using these historic assets not to preserve the past, but to be a place for learning and building the community into the future,” said Danielle Linzer, senior director of education, learning and research at the museum.

“More Light,” an installation by Dick Esterle, hangs from the great dome of the Children’s Museum of Pittsburgh studio.

While popular among the public, access to the arts and arts education has been declining for the past three decades, according to a 2017 report by the National Endowment for the Arts. When public school funding or support for the arts is cut, community organizations, large institutions and an array of teaching artists have had to take up the easel.

Creative learning in Pittsburgh weaves a complex network of arts education programs in and out of schools, fueled by teaching artists who actively practice and teach in their topic area. But the network had been diffuse. Many of these programs have had limited and inconsistent funding and have been staffed by a rotating workforce of underpaid arts educators, leaving pockets of quality arts programming out of reach for many of Pittsburgh's youth, according to a 2019 report by University of Pittsburgh's School of Education funded by The Heinz Endowments.

Connecting those arts and cultural organizations with youth throughout Pittsburgh and creating professional development paths for teaching artists while prioritizing equity form the crux of the Endowments' Creative Learning initiative, launched in early 2020.

It's a youth development strategy that uses Pittsburgh's creative and cultural assets — from large institutions like the Children's Museum to smaller nonprofits like Assemble, a community space for art and technology education in Garfield — to act as levers for learning.

"We made a bet that bringing together discipline-specific arts education with the out-of-school-time space — along with the intention of equitable outcomes for a young person's well-being and a role for themselves in the future — would be the right place to invest," said Mac Howison, program officer for Creative Learning at the Endowments.

Participating in the arts as a kid can be transformative. Studies have shown links between arts education and improved critical thinking outcomes and school attendance, higher standardized test scores and college aspirations, and increased empathy, a 2021 American Academy for the Arts analysis found.

But access to the arts has long been inequitable. Declines in art education have hit Black and brown students the hardest. A 2011 National Endowment for the Arts report noted that since the mid-1980s, Black students have experienced a 49 percent decline in arts education, while white students have seen almost no reduction in access to arts education.

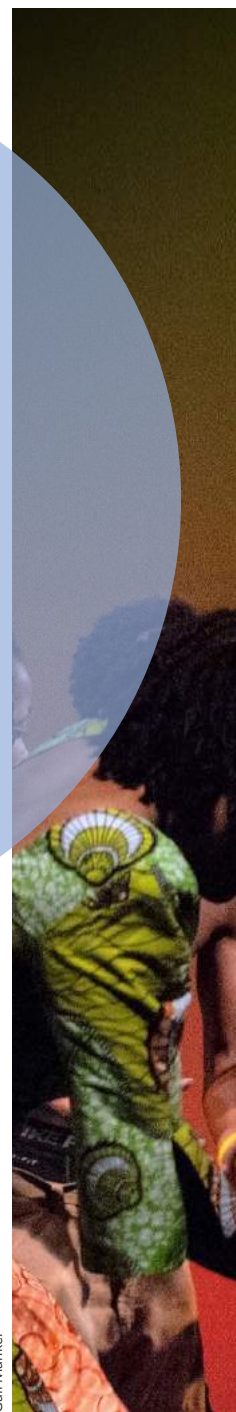
The problem persists in Pittsburgh where University of Pittsburgh researchers determined that 94 percent of arts program directors and 77 percent of educators surveyed

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Gail Manker





The Legacy Arts Project and the Kelly Strayhorn Theater presented the 10th Dance Africa: Pittsburgh, *Past, Present, Future* last July at the Kelly Strayhorn. Dance Africa member Baba Chuck Davis, foreground, was part of a performance at the event, which featured dances representing Ghana, Guinea, Senegal, Cuba and the United States.



During last year's ACTIVATE Arts Learning Conference, Attack Theatre performed a modern dance piece at the Kelly Strayhorn Theater in Pittsburgh's East Liberty neighborhood using a seesaw made of steel.

Elisa Cevallos

believe African American youth have unequal access to creative learning opportunities.

"That ecosystem has not been consistently connected or as collectively powerful as it could be," Mr. Howison said. "Part of it is due to historical inequities and people being left out of the conversation, part of it has to do with the pressures in the field of out-of-school-time arts and creative learning and a chronically underpaid workforce."

While the Endowments has long supported the arts, the Creative Learning initiative took a different approach to expanding access to opportunities that already existed for a swath of youth in Pittsburgh. By prioritizing funding that is inclusive of Black and brown arts, the program aims to repair the fragmented and unevenly distributed access to arts in the region and to build the pipeline of the next generation of artists and audiences.

The initiative supports a cohort of 30 provider organizations with \$15 million. At the heart, two anchor institutions — the Legacy Arts Project and the Arts Education Collaborative — work to connect schools, museums, community nonprofits, teaching artists, and youth and their families online and in the community, whether by using a drumbeat or a new social network.

For more than two decades, the Legacy Arts Project has been providing drum and dance classes to link Pittsburgh's youth to arts and culture from Africa and the diaspora.

"When young people are exposed to cultural elements, it's a fortifying experience that teaches you about yourself," said Erin Perry, executive director of the Legacy Arts Project.

The organization's classes form a thread through time, connecting people with culture, strengthening ties to their communities, and even setting youth on a path to a career in the arts. Ms. Perry started teaching West African dance as a substitute teacher in 2005, and today one of her early students works with the organization.

"As folks from the African diaspora, we're able to bring the culture into the community," she said. "That's our approach with young people. We share what we've inherited."

Legacy Arts' impact has rippled through the community through partnerships with Carnegie Mellon University's architecture program and local nonprofits such as Pittsburgh Glass Center, Assemble and Women for a Healthy Environment.

A need for virtual connection across southwestern Pennsylvania's diverse creative learning community spurred the Arts Education Collaborative to build an online hub for schools, arts organizations, teaching artists and families that's free and searchable.

Still in its early stages, artlook® SWPA is an online match-making portal for about 150 schools and 70 arts organizations and independent teaching across 13 counties in southwestern Pennsylvania. Messaging a potential collaborator takes just a click.

Schools share potential in- and out-of-school opportunities while arts organizations and teaching artists share descriptions of their programs and disciplines of practice.

Outside of the few full-time positions in public school districts and universities, most teaching artists work outside

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Dallas Chapman, 16, below left, records music in the studio at the Lighthouse Project, a teen center focused on music and media arts that is housed in a state-of-the-art facility at the Homewood-Brushton YMCA in Pittsburgh. Journey Washington, 5, below right, is too young for Lighthouse programming, but she got a taste of the activities during a ribbon-cutting for the opening of the facility's new Verizon digital inclusion center. She is programming an Ozobot that was brought to the event and that uses different color combination codes to perform various movements, such as going in reverse, turning or dancing.



The nonprofit Assemble blends art and technology in activities that stimulate young people's imagination while they learn. At Girls Maker Night, below from left, Ada Malec, 11; Anna Hirsh, 11; Sabrina Anselmo, 11; and Jamayah Martin, 12, enjoy playing Dance Dance Revolution, Makey Makey style. Makey Makey projects help youth learn about coding and other aspects of technology through interactive activities such as exploring electricity through dancing. Zuri Manigault, 10, right, is ready to use an iPad to film her stop-motion animation project as part of an activity in which students also build and photograph dioramas.



Photo courtesy of Assemble



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of schools, often part-time, piecing together programs to make a living.

“The caliber of teaching artists in Pittsburgh is what drives creative learning and the relationship between them and the folks on the ground,” said James Brown, director of education at Pittsburgh Parks Conservancy and former project director of the Lighthouse Project at the Homewood-Brushton YMCA. “There’s nothing to invest in if you don’t have great people who do this work and want to get better at it and really believe it transforms kids’ lives.”

Mr. Brown began his career in Pittsburgh as a teaching artist working with after-school programs at Carnegie Mellon University. He went on to develop the Lighthouse Project, a teen center focused on music and media arts, that began as a program inside Westinghouse Academy 6–12 in the city’s Homewood neighborhood.

In 2016, a \$1.5 million project supported by the Endowments helped move the teen center into a new state-of-the-art facility at the Homewood-Brushton YMCA, complete with a recording studio, digital music lab and space to learn

from teaching artists. Empowering the youth to take part in the design of the space was crucial to its growth.

“For the kids to come into the space and see the paint on the wall and say, ‘I picked that color’ or ‘I wanted it to look like that,’ that was the first step in communicating the value of what our youth think and feel,” Mr. Brown said. “It flowed from there, and then we were able to start attracting kids from around the city.”

Filling an artistic niche out of school has been Assemble’s conscious approach.

“I always like to think of us as the crazy aunt who comes in and throws some sparkle but might light the fire and connect you to other things,” said Nina Barbuto, Assemble’s executive director. “With anything we do, we want to highlight the folks who might have been diminished or erased from our history books.”

Assemble does this currently through an Afrofuturism curriculum that explores Black history along with current work by Black artists to help kids “explore the past while also seeing the future.”

Assemble has prioritized professional development and growing its force of teaching artists. What began as an all-volunteer-run organization now has 12 full-time staff members.

The Children’s Museum of Pittsburgh has a parallel focus of supporting professional development and preparing youth and artists for jobs with a future, but within a larger, established institution.

“It’s hard to shift the perception of who we are here for, what we are here for,” Ms. Linzer said concerning the museum’s offerings.

Its MuseumLab, for example, opened in 2019 in the old Carnegie Free Library of Allegheny branch and includes lab space and programming around art and technology from metalworking to fashion design to virtual reality for kids ages 10 and up. It also hosts a free after-school program for middle schoolers that focuses on art, making and social justice, among other work.

An evaluation of the Creative Learning initiative is planned to occur by the end of the year. In the long run, success for Mr. Howison would be a “well-networked creative learning system that improved access to arts learning and creative opportunities for youth,” demonstrated by increased participation, partnerships, and professional development for teaching artists.

And the next generation of artists and audiences is already setting their own direction for the future, according to Ms. Barbuto of Assemble.

“I can’t wait for all the kids to take over,” she said. “I am excited for their more fluid expression and helping folks have a better vocabulary for curiosity and acceptance. Being contextually responsive and culturally relevant is the key for them.” **h**