

Art Transforms. How and for Whom?

How can the arts play an empowering and transformative¹ role in the lives of youth living in Pittsburgh’s “distressed neighborhoods”?

Introduction

As a part of an intensified effort to make the grant-making portfolio of The Heinz Endowments’ Arts & Culture Program responsive and relevant to a broader cross-section of Pittsburgh, we have asked your assistance to help us form a grant-making strategy that will increase the role of the arts in **transforming** and empowering youth living in **“distressed neighborhoods.”** We place this emphasis on “distressed neighborhoods” because we recognize the inequities of access to powerful arts experiences in our city. We draw our definition of “distressed communities” from the Allegheny County Health Department, which characterizes these communities as areas of high unemployment and pervasive poverty. Please note that while the term “distressed” gives us a geographic focus and places a clear emphasis on issues of socioeconomic equity, we recognize that the term “distressed” does not remotely capture the resilience and humanity of these neighborhoods. We use the term because of its prevalence but place it in quotes to note its shortcomings as a term to describe the communities that are home to so many Pittsburgh residents.

We realize that community change will not occur because of arts alone and that the challenges facing “distressed neighborhoods” relate to and intensify one another. However, we strongly believe that the arts can provide solutions in the struggle to address **poverty, racism** and other forms of oppression that **form and denote** these communities. The arts have powerful value in addressing both community and individual well-being. We know that, well taught, the arts build lasting skills, enrich identity, and change world views in ways that undermine the insidious effect of poverty and racism on a child’s development and a **neighborhood’s culture**. We also know that we already have **artists in Pittsburgh** whose life’s work is to challenge oppression and make a larger impact on community. How can the Endowments add value by helping a strong cohort of artists prepare to work in community settings on important community challenges? **How can artists and communities come together to develop a framework to approach this work?** What are the delivery mechanisms by which a foundation can support this work? What kind of **arts-based pedagogy** would provide the best opportunity for youth in “distressed communities,” one that would not turn a blind eye to the **structural causes of distress** and yet not overlook the power of **individual arts experiences to change lives**? How can we both respond to community interest and need, and introduce ideas that we find compelling? These are questions facing

¹ The focus on transformation was brought by the consulting firm, Lion & Butterfly

The Heinz Endowments' Arts & Culture Program as we work to become more effective and equitable (i.e. fair) in our grant-making for youth in Pittsburgh.

As these questions have **vexed** the Endowments' Arts & Culture Program for the better part of two years, we are looking for new perspectives, insights and feedback to help us ask good questions, and, if we have good questions, how can we proceed to construct answers. To this end, the consulting firm Lion & Butterfly, led by anasa troutman, will lead a team of **15-20 artists, nonprofit organization leaders, cultural workers and foundation staff** through a process that includes **anti racism-work, visits to other communities and consensus building** in order to answer the question: **“How can the arts be empowering and transformative in the lives of young people living in Pittsburgh’s “distressed neighborhoods?”** We hope to engage participants with a broad range of ideas, including youth development and engagement, teaching artistry, arts and social justice, and out-of-school time programming in this effort. Our hope is that this conversation would **clarify our thinking, strengthen the network to do this work and set us on a course to develop new initiatives** that bring the power of the arts to bear on the challenges of “distressed neighborhoods” and those facing the young people who live in them.

Current Arts Education/Community Arts Work at Heinz

To build this new agenda, we need to **reflect** on the experience we have gained from our own arts and culture grant making as well as the work of our **colleagues at the Endowments**. In terms of our program's grant making, we have finished or are now coming to the close of distinct grant-making agendas in **Culturally Responsive Arts Education** and **Out of School Time Arts**. In addition to our own work, we want to build on what we are learning from our colleagues in the Endowments' **Children, Youth and Families Program** and their efforts to create **systems of high quality out-of-school-time programming** as well as the **Education Program's recently begun work in Empowering Youth as Education Reformers**. Clearly, there are many strands of work and thought that need weaving together. The following sections provide a basic background on our work to date:

1) The Culturally Responsive Arts Education Program (CRAE)

Since the 2008-09 school year, the Arts & Culture Program has been funding the **piloting of the CRAE program in three Pittsburgh Public Schools**. The program was based on the findings of an Endowments' commissioned literature review titled **“Cultural Responsiveness, Racial Identity and Academic Success: A Review of Literature” by Drs. Mary Stone Hanley and George Noblit**. This report found that there was a great opportunity for culturally responsive arts to play a critical role in supporting the achievement of African American children. As is appropriate with a literature review, there were many different models of what could be termed culturally responsive education. However, we were drawn to the work highlighted in **Dr. Theresa Perry's essay “Up From Parched Earth: Toward a Theory of African American Achievement.”** A core tenet of Dr. Perry's work is the necessity of a **counter narrative** if African American children are going to achieve success, which Perry says has traditionally meant achieving as an individual and making a contribution to the larger Black community. This counter narrative would be one that disrupts the

dominant narrative of the intellectual and cultural inferiority of African American people, particularly in their relation to white people. After three years of operation, we would say the Endowments' initial foray into Culturally Responsive Arts Education (CRAE) has met with mixed success. While there are a number of reasons for this, the overarching reason for our difficulties is that we missed the needed **field or movement building work** that was required as a prerequisite to begin such a program and thus trainings for teachers, curriculum and assessments were not developed in advance of the program. We imagine that the next phase of our work in “distressed communities” would take advantage of the learnings and values of CRAE. However, this time we are interested in building an approach in collaboration with a **larger community of theorists and practitioners** and for these ideas to be interwoven into a larger agenda of arts in “distressed neighborhoods”.

2) Out of School Time Arts

A program that was provided in partnership with the **Endowments' Children, Youth & Families Program**, the **Out of School Time Arts Program** has funded artists to work in six community settings over the course of 18 months. In contrast to the CRAE program, the OST arts program has not had as its chief focus race and culture, but rather has been focused on serving youth from neighborhoods defined as “distressed” by the Allegheny County Health Department. Interestingly, these programs have essentially ended up serving African American children, nonetheless. These programs have connected artists to young people, but the teaching artists have reported mixed levels of success across a range of measures. **Artists have varying levels of skill in working in community settings**, and some have connected more or less successfully to their site, while others have struggled with staff or parents. A difficulty faced by all of the programs is the limited amount of time for youth to develop skill in an art form.

This grants program has also provided “learning communities” for teaching artists, i.e., regular convenings where teaching artists and after school programs could learn from one another while developing logic models and evaluation metrics for their work. The program evaluation reported that teachers learned a great deal from one another through the convenings, but the learning community's value was lessened the greater the experience of the teaching artist, because their experience made beginning conversations less useful. There were, of course, recommendations for improvement and one of these recommendations was for their to be more instruction for teaching artists in the areas of cultural responsiveness, effective teaching and working in out-of-school time settings. For this next phase of work, we would like to take on what we have learned regarding the value of learning communities, how teaching artists can better evaluate their own work and how to help prepare non-arts organizations to house teaching artists. This can be accomplished while improving the community's capacity to train teaching artists who are able to help **youth understand issues of race, racism and culture in ways that are both empowering and developmentally appropriate**.

3) Connections to Grant Making Within the Endowments

The Children, Youth & Families Program has led work to build an OST system that would support quality programming for youth, including the development of **standards** for such critical areas as **staff training, program evaluation, and proper facilities**. The Arts & Culture Program has just finished partnering with the CY&F Program in the OST Arts Program mentioned above. As already mentioned, the next stage of art in “distressed communities” would need to take this work and learning into consideration.

Over the last few years, **the Education Program** has embarked on an effort to develop models of youth leadership to support its larger agenda of education reform. This effort will begin grant making shortly and has already produced valuable strategies for assessing the degree to which **programs are building youth leadership**. We believe the arts are uniquely positioned to engage youth in leadership roles and would like the next stage of our work to take advantage of the work of the Education Program.

In addition, the Endowments has begun a **place-based initiative focused on Hazelwood** that will involve the expertise and resources of all program areas at the Endowments. It will be important for the Arts & Culture Program to refine its thinking with regard to its work in “distressed neighborhoods”, in order to play an important part in these discussions.

Preliminary Conclusions from Previous Work and Next Steps

In reflecting on our previous work, we realize that the major challenges facing our arts education and community-based grant making are ones of both content and structure. In the area of content, we have learned that quality curriculum and training materials for this work are in short supply. In terms of structure, the problems are more daunting. **Teaching artists are often inadequately paid and/or trained**. Out-of-school-time “systems” are fragile and under resourced as well. Quality arts instruction is often not found in public or charter systems. And if these barriers were not enough, we are ambitious in our aspirations for this work. We aspire not only to the provision of quality arts instruction. We also want to engage art and artists in social justice issues and the **structural and historical** barriers blocking the way of so many young people. For example, some of our prior work has focused specifically on the issue of **internalized racial oppression and Black children**. One of the things we learned from our CRAE and OST work was that **artists and arts organizations were ill-prepared** to integrate the instruction of their art form with larger questions on race and culture. As a result, we greatly diminished the chance of success by underestimating what kinds of curricular and professional development assistance artists would be needed.

We also think that our previous **grant making in these areas may have been too compartmentalized**; that is, we have had separate grant programs for culturally responsive arts, out-of-school-time arts, and in-school arts. We had no mechanism to “connect the dots” across programs, and therefore diluted the impact of our efforts. **We want to build solutions that are more comprehensive** and that respond directly to the issues facing Pittsburgh and Allegheny County communities.

While the Arts & Culture Program has a number of ideas about the essential elements of quality arts provision for youth in “distressed neighborhoods,” we feel that it is critically important for this next phase of the work to be built collectively with members of the local and national community. Constituencies that we want to consult include: people whose work centers on the role of the arts in “distressed neighborhoods,” people whose work focuses on the role of Black culture in community building, leaders in teaching artistry, leaders of school-based arts education, leaders in out-of-school time programming and leaders in youth leadership. Through discussion and reflection with colleagues about these complex issues, we hope that the **Endowments’ Arts & Culture Program will be able to develop a comprehensive strategy that would bring the power of the arts to the aid of youth in “distressed neighborhoods.”**

The Process

Phase 1: Laying the groundwork and building the frame

1. **Initial Coming Together:** Participants come together to create community and build a container for the process and the conversations that will be had during the work. The group will talk about why the Endowments is taking on this question of transformative arts in “distressed neighborhoods” and the assumptions we bring to the process. What are the assumptions and dreams that the participants are bringing to the process? What are the other elements of the foundation doing that relate to the process? How does Lion & Butterfly approach visioning and consensus building and what are their expectations?

2. **Race Peace workshop: Presented by M.U.G.A.B.E.E. (Men Under Guidance Acting Before Early Extinction)** Because we believe race and racism are issues that need to be addressed directly in this work focused on “distressed neighborhoods,” early in this process the group will all engage in a two-day anti-racism workshop designed to help the group strengthen its capacity to think about and discuss these issues. Race Peace is a multi-generational performance and dialogue project that deals with the debilitating fog of **racism** in an attempt to provide an opportunity for people to celebrate and explore common bonds, debate their differences, and lay the civic foundation to **pursue solutions to the issues that impact their communities.**

Phase 2: Information Gathering

1. In small groups, participants will visit, observe and talk with communities practicing a range of approaches to making arts empowering and transformative in “distressed neighborhoods.”

Phase 3: What do we want to see, what is possible and how do we get there?

1. What is the current state of arts instruction in **Pittsburgh’s “distressed neighborhoods”**? What are its strengths and weaknesses? How empowering and transformative is it? How do we create an environment for young people that reflects what we want for them and their lives?

2. What are the components of a **transformative arts agenda**? What does transformative art look like? What would be the critical elements of the **pedagogy or approach**?

3. What would be the critical elements of an agenda bringing arts to “distressed communities”? How might we balance issues of individual arts learning with the idea of helping youth think about **larger social issues facing them and their neighborhoods**? What would success look like in a grants program for youth in “distressed neighborhoods”? What could be **different in the neighborhood** as a result of this work?

Phase 4: Lion & Butterfly Deliver Recommendations

1. Based on the input, work and recommendations of participants, the consulting firm leading this process will deliver a set of recommendations on how The Heinz Endowments could best create a grant-making agenda that would support the **arts as a transformative and empowering force** in the lives of youth living in “distressed neighborhoods.”

Questions the Endowments will need to answer in the course of the process

1. What does it mean to be “a **transformative artist**”?
2. What kind of **supports/programs/intermediaries/organizations/places** would Pittsburgh need to have in place in order to deliver a transformative arts agenda in Pittsburgh’s “distressed communities”? Teaching artist training? Community-based organizations qualified to support the work? Support of the school district? A separate organization and physical space?
3. How can we create content and pedagogy that addresses issues of socio economic status and **racial/ethnic identity in a way that builds the resilience of young people**?
4. What is the appropriate balance between a program defined by community and one “brought to” the community?
5. How prominently should we raise issues of **poverty and racism** in the framing of an agenda that will likely reach many African American communities? What is lost and/or gained by raising or not raising this issue?