

There is no question that education in America has turned into a national debate. The White House, Congress, state legislatures, and administrators are urging reform and improvements. The President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities (PCAH), in coordination with the U.S. Department of Education and the White House Domestic Policy Council, has created the Turnaround Arts Initiative to help improve some of the lowest performing elementary and middle schools in the country.

It all began as a campaign promise. When Barack Obama was running for president, one of his campaign platforms was a “champion for arts and culture.” He specifically pledged several items in support of arts education, including the promise to “use the bully pulpit to promote the importance of arts and arts education in America.” He also pledged to “engage the foundation and corporate community to increase support for public/private partnerships” that support arts education.



CREATING SUCCESS
TURN



▶ The arts can be an innovative method for boosting student engagement and increasing academic achievement in low-performing schools. All photos throughout this article are courtesy of Turnaround Arts.

IN SCHOOLS

AROUND ARTS

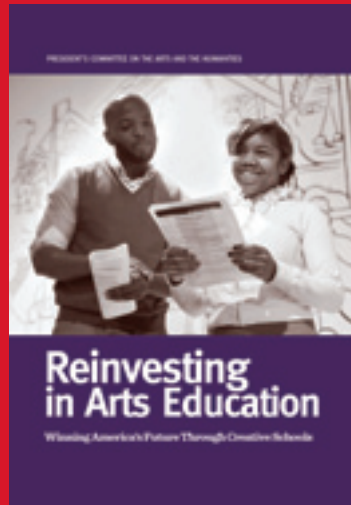
By Kristen Engebretsen, Americans for the Arts

QUICK LOOK

Reinvesting in Arts Education

► “The president and I want to ensure that all children have access to great works of art at museums. We want them to have access to great poets and musicians in theaters around the country, to arts education in their schools and community workshops.” — First Lady and Honorary Chair of PCAH Michelle Obama

Read the report: <http://bit.ly/ReinvestingInArtsEd>.



One way that President Obama has been able to keep these campaign promises is through the important work of the President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities (PCAH). Created under President Reagan in 1982, the Committee works with federal agencies and the private sector to initiate and support key programs in the arts and the humanities, usually through research and policy analysis. Central to the PCAH mission is using the power of the arts and humanities to contribute to the vibrancy of our society, the education of our children, the creativity of our citizens, and the strength of our democracy. First Lady Michelle Obama is the Honorary Chair of PCAH, and members of the Committee include public figures, celebrated artists, and presidentially appointed individuals.

In 2011, the Committee released a landmark report called *Reinvesting in Arts Education: Winning America's Future Through Creative Schools*. The report summarized more than a decade of research showing the benefits of arts education in

our nation's schools. The report synthesized this information and described how our schools can utilize the arts as a tool to 1) close the achievement gap, 2) lower the dropout rate, and 3) prepare our students for jobs in the 21st century workforce. The report offers case studies, an appendix of model programs, and a set of recommendations for federal, state, and local policymakers and stakeholders.

The report offers five recommendations to increase and improve arts education in America:

1. Build collaborations among different approaches.
2. Develop the field of arts integration.
3. Expand in-school opportunities for teaching artists.
4. Utilize federal and state policies to reinforce the place of arts in K–12 education.
5. Widen the focus of evidence gathering about arts education.

These recommendations lay the foundation for PCAH's work and mission both immediately and in the future.

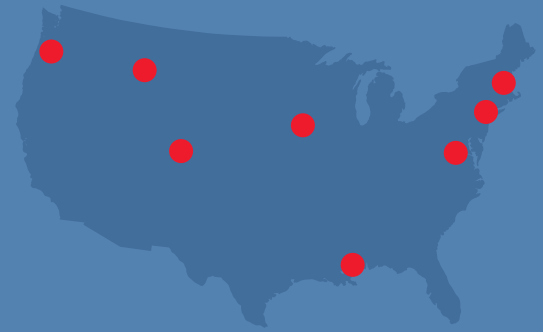
TURNAROUND ARTS: THE PROGRAM

In 2012, PCAH launched a new initiative to test the hypothesis that high-quality and integrated arts education can be an effective tool to strengthen school reform efforts. The new initiative, Turnaround Arts (which implements several of the recommendations from *Reinvesting in Arts Education*), focuses on using the arts to help boost academic achievement and increase student motivation in schools facing some of the toughest educational challenges in the country.

Turnaround Arts was also designed to be an innovative example of public/private partnership. Federal partners include the White House Domestic Policy Council, the U.S. Department of Education, and the National Endowment for the Arts, which contributes both funding and expertise. Private partners include the Ford Foundation, the Herb Alpert Foundation, Crayola, the NAMM Foundation, the Aspen Institute, and Booz Allen Hamilton. Americans for the Arts was added as a coordinating partner in June 2013.

Turnaround Arts works exclusively in “turnaround schools”—schools that perform in the lowest 5 percent on their state test scores and are receiving School Improvement Grants (SIG) through the U.S. Department of Education. SIG grants are awarded to help persistently low-performing schools that agree to implement a series of significant and structural interventions.

After an application process, open to any SIG grantees, and a nomination process from state and municipal authorities, PCAH members conducted



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Turnaround Arts Schools

▣ As part of the program, PCAH Artist members have each “adopted” at least one of the Turnaround Arts schools. Turnaround Artist involvement with schools takes many forms, including participating in performances, master classes, and community events at the school.

- **Chuck Close**
Roosevelt School
Bridgeport, CT
- **Yo-Yo Ma**
Orchard Gardens K–8 Pilot School
Boston, MA
- **Sarah Jessica Parker**
Martin Luther King Jr. School
Portland, OR
- **Kerry Washington**
Savoy Elementary School
Washington, DC
- **Forest Whitaker**
Findley Elementary School
Des Moines, IA
- **Damian Woetzel**
Lame Deer Jr. High School
Lame Deer, MT &
Orchard Gardens K–8
Pilot School, Boston, MA
- **Alfre Woodard**
Renew Cultural Arts Academy,
New Orleans, LA &
Noel Community Arts School
Denver, CO

“When you walk into a Turnaround Arts school, it just feels different. There’s a lot of joy in the hallways; people are engaged; family members and community members are coming into the school for performances.”

—Kathy Fletcher, Turnaround Arts Program Director

▶ Students at Roosevelt School enjoyed a presentation of *The Wiz*, a musical adaptation of the beloved *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*.



▶ Turnaround Artist and mentor Sarah Jessica Parker greets students at her “adopted” school—Martin Luther King Jr. School in Portland, OR.



site visits to each of the final schools. Criteria for selection included demonstrated need and opportunity for arts education impact, strong school leadership with district support, and evidence of a commitment to arts education as a pillar of the school’s turnaround strategy. As part of that commitment, all schools were required to have at least one full-time arts specialist on staff. The eight schools selected represent demographic diversity of environment (urban, rural, suburban), grade levels (elementary and middle schools), geographic spread, and student populations.

After consulting with each selected school and developing a customized strategic plan, PCAH and its partners provide each school with the arts education services, resources, and materials they most need to engage their community, raise the visibility of their achievements, and increase the likelihood of successful school turnaround.

Each school receives a minimum of the following services:

- A summer institute for school leadership with nationally recognized arts education providers;
- In-school professional development during the school year;
- Partnerships with community arts education and cultural organizations;
- PCAH Turnaround Artists working in each of the schools;
- Additional arts supplies and musical instruments;
- A public arts event in the school with students, parents, and community;
- Communications campaign highlighting success stories of the schools’ progress and achievements; and
- An educational evaluation of the effects of arts learning on whole school turnaround.

The key to these efforts is building arts education programming that is rigorous, effective, and integrated into the school.



▶ Students at Turnaround Arts schools are encouraged to engage and express themselves through curriculum that focuses on the arts—such as dance.

RESULTS

The schools selected to be in the program have completed one of the two years in this pilot. While full program evaluation is currently being conducted by an evaluation team including Booz Allen Hamilton and the University of Chicago, it is clear from anecdotal evidence that the initiative has impacted principals, teachers, students, and the entire school culture.

EMBOLDENED PRINCIPALS

Orchard Gardens K–8 Pilot School in Roxbury, MA was struggling: 90 percent of students qualify for free or reduced-priced lunches; about half of students are learning English as a second language; 20 percent of students are classified as special needs; and the school was in the bottom 5 percent of test scores across the state. As part of the bottom 5 percent, Orchard Gardens was required by federal law to take drastic measures to

turn around the school. Andrew Bott was the sixth principal in seven years and began his tenure three years ago with a commitment to take drastic measures to turn around his school. “It made the most sense to just go big and go bold...if we were going to undergo a transformation, it made the most sense to tackle it altogether,” Bott stated in an [interview with the BBC](#).

Bott began by firing 80 percent of his teachers—state and federal law required him to replace at least 50 percent. Bott chose to go well above that minimum so that he could bring in teachers excited by his new vision. He offered extensive professional development to the new and remaining teachers, and extended his school day to allow more time for tutoring and study of additional subjects.

And then Bott decided to try something that has become the arts education story heard around the world—

he fired the security guards at Orchard Gardens and instead hired arts teachers. “The school definitely had a prison feel,” [Bott told NBC](#). He felt that it wasn’t worth the \$250,000 a year to have six security guards chasing around kids who were misbehaving.

And if there is one thing that we have learned from Hollywood (from the likes of *Lean on Me* and *Dangerous Minds*) about turning around schools, it is that if you treat kids like criminals, they act like criminals. A video produced by the BBC shows a beautiful campus, full of students who are engaged and learning. The hallways are full of murals, and sounds of music drift from the band room. Violence in the school has been drastically reduced and test scores have increased. Students at Orchard Gardens have among the most improved scores in math and reading in the entire state, all the while getting between three to seven hours of high quality arts instruction per week. “Kids are going to do well in school when you design and build a school that kids want to be in,” [Bott told HuffPost Live](#) reporter Alicia Menendez.

ENGAGED STUDENTS

It is just another normal day at [Savoy Elementary in Washington, DC](#). Students enter the cafeteria for their morning assembly and are led through a series of songs and movements—promises and affirmations. Students chant about respecting one another and working hard. The school’s cafeteria is painted in bright bold orange, green, and red. Students used to walk in with their heads down and not make eye contact, but not anymore. The school’s Chief Creativity

QUICK LOOK

Turnaround Arts

■ **Turnaround Arts** is built on the belief that the following eight core assets must be in place in order to affect change. It truly takes a village!

- 1 **Principal** who is an advocate for the arts program, both internally and externally, and drives its integration with larger school-wide problem solving.
- 2 **Arts Specialists** on staff providing sequential, standards-based instruction during the school day on a frequent and regular basis.
- 3 **Classroom Teachers** (non-arts) integrating arts into other core content instruction and collaborating and cross-planning with arts educators.
- 4 **Teaching Artists** from the community working regularly with students and teaching staff to enrich and enhance learning.
- 5 **Parents, Community Members, and School District Officials** who are supportive of, involved in, and engaged with the arts at the school.
- 6 **Strategic Arts Planning** on an ongoing basis that includes an arts plan, shared leadership, a communications strategy, assessment, and analysis of how to use the school’s arts education resources to address larger school issues.
- 7 **Professional Development** in the arts and arts integration as a regularly scheduled activity.
- 8 **School Environment** that celebrates creativity and artistic achievement through performances and exhibitions by students, and includes the physical spaces, materials, and equipment necessary for quality learning experiences to take place.



▶ Turnaround Arts partners, Crayola and the National Association of Music Merchants, provide art supplies, musical instruments, and professional development to schools.

Officer swears these morning sessions have boosted morale and led to a sharp decrease in office referrals.

The students sing a rousing chorus of “This Little Light of Mine,” led by Kerry Washington. Ms. Washington joins the students, not as a celebrity on the sidelines, but as an integral member of the school team. Over the last year, she’s been to the school four times and gotten to know many of the teachers and students. Ms. Washington reminds the teachers and leaders at the school of the significance of the opportunities brought by participation in the arts. Ms. Washington points out that often schools in high-poverty communities don’t have the same opportunities as other schools, even if they are standard for students across town in more affluent neighborhoods. She reminds everyone that all students deserve the opportunity to explore and pursue their

passions, to express themselves, and to feel successful. And speaking from her personal experience, it is the arts that can empower many students to believe in themselves, which then can translate into academic success. “I want to make sure that we don’t miss out on the next great physicist because that student never was taught to unlock their own love of learning,” she said in an interview with the National Endowment for the Arts.

Principal Patrick Pope explains the myriad of opportunities available to his students. Over the past year, he has doubled the amount of time that students spend in arts courses through hiring more arts teachers, as well as forging partnerships with various community partners, such as the Washington Performing Arts Society. He showcases a few of the programs with a tour of the school. It starts with dance lessons taught by a Kennedy Center



▶ All Turnaround Artists are involved mentors. Emmy-nominated actress Kerry Washington performs with students at Savoy Elementary in Washington, DC.



▶ **President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities Honorary Chair, First Lady Michelle Obama, embraces students during a visit at Savoy Elementary in Washington, DC.**

teaching artist and then on to watch kindergarteners singing recitatives. Led by their classroom teacher with another Kennedy Center teaching artist, they are busy turning a book into an opera. All of these opportunities have changed how students behave and interact with their teachers (attendance is up, behavior problems down) and their academic performance. After years of decline, Savoy's state scores have gone up for the last two years.

The tour ends with the Savoy Players, a student group of talented performers who get professional-level coaching in singing and dancing. The Savoy Players have been invited to perform at the White House, among many other opportunities. The Players' parents attend rehearsals, and during this particular visit, Ms. Washington meets privately with the parents to offer advice on pursuing the arts as a career path for these talented students.

IMPROVED SCHOOL CLIMATE

As part of school reform efforts in Denver, one school reorganized as **Noel Community Arts School**, which is one of the reasons it was a good fit for the Turnaround Arts program. Administrators hoped the reorganization of the school would address a problem that has seemed intractable for low performing schools, which is improving the school culture and climate. Program Director of Turnaround Arts Kathy Fletcher told Denver's public radio local affiliate KUVO, "When you walk into a Turnaround Arts school, it just feels different. There's a lot of joy in the hallways; people are engaged; family members and community members are coming into the school for performances."

Principal Stacy Miller said that after the first year of the program, she felt a shift in the community, as the parents showed more and more pride in their children and their school's artistic achievements. At the first performance last year, there was standing room only, and parents were moved to tears. Last May, the school held a "Think Show" (also standing room only) where students used creativity and the arts to describe their thinking and what they had learned in their academic classes.

In August 2013, the school moved to a new location, and the community gathered to renovate the new space just in time for the new school year. Alfre Woodard came to Denver to assist with the school makeover and welcome the students back to school. The school partnered with a local artist, JOLT, for the creation of murals that would set

the right atmosphere for the school. As Fletcher puts it, “It just helps students want to come to school.” Principal Miller is grateful for the move to the Montbello High School campus, which will provide larger venues for performances and shows and will allow more parents and community members to be involved.

Alfre Woodard described her involvement with Noel Community Arts to KUVU as more than just an actress teaching drama, but also as a mentor and elder who is there as a role model—someone who cares about the students and expects them to succeed. “What we’re trying to do with the Turnaround Arts Initiative...we are expanding the students’ minds and horizons; we are unfolding citizens; we are helping to create innovators. And that is something that has made us strong as an American culture. Once you wiped out the arts in the public school system 20 or 30 years ago, that’s when the schools started to fail. We’re trying to help people see that correlation.”

CONCLUSION

Turnaround Arts provides extensive resources for schools most in need of an intervention. Ellen Winner, the chair of psychology at Boston College and co-author of the book *Studio Thinking: The Real Benefits of Visual Arts Education*, believes that while research cannot prove arts programs are the direct cause of increased test scores, there is a high correlation. “The most plausible hypothesis in my mind,” she says, “would be that the arts lead to engagement and attendance

and interesting teachers and engaged teachers. And it’s that which would lead to [increased] test scores.”

While the next steps in the evolution of Turnaround Arts are still being discussed, what is clear is the dramatic and profound advantage in student engagement, academic achievement, and school morale that the arts bring to struggling schools. The arts provide tools that leaders in these schools keenly need—tools to engage students and parents, encourage collaboration between teachers, and change the way the halls and classrooms feel. There is a lesson here that can be valuable for school leaders everywhere—think outside of the box in terms of what options are available to help turn around a school that needs it. The answer may be hiding in plain sight. And playing the trumpet.

QUICK LOOK

Student Voices in the Arts

► **Turnaround Arts** wants to feature more written reflections and student art work that communicates individual stories of how the arts have impacted their lives. Select pieces will be featured on the Turnaround Arts website <http://turnaroundarts.pcah.gov/> and Facebook page [facebook.com/TurnaroundArts](https://www.facebook.com/TurnaroundArts), as well as used in an ongoing way to include student perspectives in making the case for arts education as a turnaround tool. The expression could be through any art form, including creative writing. Please send submissions to turnaroundarts@pcah.gov.