



## Understanding the Big Picture, Claiming a Seat at the Table

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As music education advocates rally to support state and local budget allocations, the federal government is beginning intensive efforts to re-write the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)—the 1965 law that determines how public education is supported by the federal government. As policymakers make education decisions at all levels, balancing the challenges of limited resources with the pressing need to improve equitable access to a complete education for all students is a universal concern. A broad range of arts and education associations, fueled by individual advocates nationwide, are working as a national coalition to improve arts education policy in the next ESEA and to create a more supportive climate for state and local policymaking.

Given the touchy environment of a mid-term election year and the enormous complexity of re-writing the law (currently titled the No Child Left Behind Act), conventional wisdom in Washington is that ESEA will not be completed this year, and will be taken up by a new Congress in 2011. That said, the policy debate has begun in earnest. The Obama Administration, Congress, and education policy leaders have identified major concerns and opportunities, including some specific proposals regarding arts education. Now is a critical time for arts advocates to understand and address the education reform “big picture debate,” and to generate meaningful conversations in support of equitable access to the arts as part of a well-rounded education for every child.

The initial volley in the reauthorization debate was lobbed on March 13 of this year, as the Obama Administration unveiled their blueprint for re-writing ESEA. This road map lays out key broad strokes that indicate what the Administration is committed to supporting as Congress shapes new legislation.

Speaking before the national Arts Education Partnership forum on April 9, US Secretary of Education Arne Duncan outlined his perspective on opportunities for federal support for arts education. In his remarks, available on the US Department of Education’s web site (<http://www2.ed.gov/news/speeches/2010/04/04092010.html>), Secretary Duncan says that the arts, “Can no longer be treated as a frill,”



and acknowledges that during his national listening tour, “Almost everywhere I went, I heard people express concern that the curriculum has narrowed, especially in schools that serve disproportionate numbers of disadvantaged students.”

How does the Administration suggest the federal government can take action as the arts have been too frequently squeezed to the margin? Three areas of the Obama Administration’s blueprint were highlighted in Duncan’s remarks:

- Proposals would allow states to incorporate assessments of subjects beyond English, language arts, and math in their accountability systems. This echoes earlier 2009 remarks by the President in which he said, “I’m calling on our nation’s governors and state education chiefs to develop standards and assessments that don’t simply measure whether students can fill in a bubble on a test, but whether they possess 21st century skills like problem-solving and critical thinking and entrepreneurship and creativity.”
- The current federal Arts in Education funding program would be merged with other funding areas so that districts, states, and non-profits would apply for competitive grants to support

the arts among other eligible non-tested core academic subjects of learning through a new fund for “Effective Teaching and Learning for a Well-Rounded Education.”

- New resources for afterschool and extended day learning could open the door for support for arts education programs.

While these proposals acknowledge the arts among other core academic subjects of learning – a distinction included in the current NCLB law and reinforced at several points in the Obama blueprint—they also present concerns for arts advocates. It is a critical fact that the vast majority of education policy decisions are made at the state and local level. All three of the federal policy proposals above are based on the assumption that state and local leaders would be motivated to choose the arts when crafting applications to U.S. Department of Education and forming assessment plans. The experience of arts proponents—both historically and in the wake of the current economic climate—has proven that there are sometimes insurmountable challenges to gaining support for the arts among state and local policymakers in response to NCLB’s math and reading focus, the added emphasis on Science Technology, Engineering and Mathematics

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(STEM) in the federal stimulus funding, and states' struggles to overcome education budget shortfalls.

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The most recent efforts of the Working Group have centered on constructing and advancing legislative recommendations for the next version of the

ESEA. This multi-year process began with crafting the November 2006 unified statement, *Arts Education: Creating Student Success in School, Work, and Life*, a community-wide call for strengthening the federal commitment to arts education with a goal of ensuring equitable access to the arts for all students. To find a place in the broader education reform debate, the group looked beyond the circle of national arts advocates to those education associations steeped in the policy reform dialogue. This universal statement appears as the final article in this special focus section. See it on page 85. The statement has been delivered to every U.S. Congressional office, is an entry point to conversations with key legislative staff on Capitol Hill, and an updated 2010 version is re-circulating for national endorsement

The accompanying federal legislative recommendations echo the principles outlined in the unified statement of support for arts education. These policy proposals were informed by on-the-ground input from local and state arts education stakeholders:

- Retain the Arts in the Definition of Core Academic Subjects of Learning
- Require Annual State Reports on Student Access to Core Academic Subjects
- Improve National Data Collection and Research in Arts Education
- Reauthorize the Arts in Education Programs of the U.S. Department of Education

These initial recommendations are subject to continued refinement and expansion as the reauthorization debate continues. The 45-page Obama education blueprint—really, a breezy read worth undertaking!—provides important insight into the major themes that will play out in the upcoming federal debate, themes that are likely no surprise for Ohio music education advocates steeped in ongoing state-level advocacy:

- College and Career-Ready Students
- School Turn-Around Strategies
- Improved Professional Development
- Evidence-Based Instructional Models

For the arts to have a seat at the table in this continually evolving policy debate, advocates at all levels will need to be prepared to describe how a comprehensive arts education, available to every

student, will contribute to these national education goals. While advancing the arts in the broader reform debate will present many challenges, Ohio music educators have a deep well of resources to build a convincing case about the impact of the arts on improving education. The strong advocacy material available through the OMEA online includes links to state and national hubs of solid information about the benefits of arts education, including SupportMusic.com, the Ohio Alliance for Arts Education, and the Arts Education Partnership. If you haven't looked into it yet, don't miss a single issue of the Arts Education Partnership's new communication tool, AEP wire. Coupling research and experience-backed arguments with strategic alignment among broader education stakeholders can ensure that the arts shake off the often-held reputation as an unfortunate, left-behind subject of learning and instead be valued an essential partners in improving public education.

Heather Noonan is the Vice President for Advocacy for the League of American Orchestras. From the League's Washington, D.C. office, Ms. Noonan represents orchestras before Congress, the White House, and federal agencies. Her legislative portfolio includes federal policies related to the National Endowment for the Arts, education, immigration, cultural exchange, and nonprofit tax issues. Ms. Noonan serves on the national steering committee of the Arts Education Partnership and has served on the U.S. Department of Education's steering committees for the America Goes Back to School project and Partnership for Family Involvement in Education. Ms. Noonan has served on the board of directors of the American Youth Philharmonic Orchestras, and was the Newsbreak Editor for the *Teaching Artist Journal* from 2003 to 2005. She edited the League's 1998 publication and the current web site *Artists from Abroad: The Complete Guide to Immigration and Tax Requirements for Foreign Guest Artists*. Prior to joining the League in 1996, she was a legislative associate for the American Arts Alliance.