Arts Education Report: More Teachers and Programs, but Inequity Remains
By: Melissa Sanchez / July 09, 2014

Two years ago, when Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel unveiled an arts plan for schools, it was unclear how much arts instruction was already being offered to students - either by certified teachers or through partnerships with community organizations.

Now, schools and arts leaders know the answer: There are more teachers than many would have guessed, but they are inequitably distributed across the city and the total is far below the goals.

“There are a lot of assumptions that people make about what is out there and what isn’t out there,” said Paul Sznewajs, executive director of the arts nonprofit organization, Ingenuity Inc. “What we found is that there are a lot of resources out there, maybe more than we anticipated, but there are still many gaps in the system. More teachers than we assumed there to be in the system, but underneath is the challenge of student access to those teachers and whether those teachers are distributed equitably across the system.”

Today, Ingenuity released a first-of-its kind analysis of arts offerings, staffing, partnerships and funding in CPS during the 2012-13 school year, when the Chicago Cultural Plan was unveiled. Among the findings in the report:

-- On average, elementary students received 99 minutes of arts instruction per week. As part of the district’s arts guidelines, elementary schools should provide at least 120 minutes per week of arts instruction. But, according to the self-reported data, only 40 percent of CPS elementary schools offered that much arts education during the 2012-13 school year.

-- The number of arts programs provided by partner organizations varied wildly from neighborhood to neighborhood. A striking map in the report shows how wealthier neighborhoods such as Lincoln Park and Lake View have more than 50 arts partnerships in schools, while some of the city’s poorest neighborhoods in the South and West side have 10 or fewer.

-- More than 400 arts organizations had active partnerships to offer programming in CPS schools. Sznewajs said he thought the number was about half as many.

-- 95 percent of elementary/middle schools, and 88 percent of high schools, had at least one part- or full-time arts instructor. Most schools with arts instructors - 82 percent - also had community arts partners.

In a conference call with reporters on Tuesday, CPS leaders said it wasn’t surprising that the district hadn’t met its goals during the 2012-13 school year; after all, that’s when they were created.
“Are we anywhere near where we need to be? Of course not,” said CEO Barbara Byrd-Bennett. “This is a snapshot in the past that has now informed us.”

One way the information has already done so, she explained, was in the placement of 84 certified arts teachers who will be hired with $10.5 million in tax increment financing (TIF) dollars. The vast majority, Byrd-Bennett said, will work in schools in the South and West sides “where there is the greatest need.” (Here’s a list of where all the arts teachers will be heading next fall. Separately, CPS will hire an equal number of high school gym teachers with TIF dollars to comply with another mandate. Also, read a CPS fact sheet in response to the arts report.*)

The TIF money for new art teachers won’t be permanent, nor is it complete. Next year, schools must pay 25 percent of the cost of the teachers, and the district will pick up the remainder with the TIF money. The following year, schools must pay 50 percent of the cost.

And that, say CPS critics, is a problem. Last year, a reported 100 arts teachers lost their jobs in budget cuts across the district.

“We’re either going to make a commitment to arts education or we’re not,” said Chicago Teachers Union President Karen Lewis. “Relying on vanishing ways of paying things puts us in the same position we’re already in [...]. I don’t think this is a sustainable plan.”

Too much attention to partnerships?

Ingenuity’s “State of the Arts” report was based on a variety of sources including the CPS Creative Schools Certification survey, which only 57 percent of schools completed. This fall, Ingenuity will publish a follow-up report using 2013-14 data, which is just now being analyzed. The report promises to include better data, as this time around, 89 percent of schools completed the CPS survey.

“That’s a really positive sign to show both participation and movement forward,” said CPS arts director Mario Rossero.

Charter and contract schools, however, were the least likely to return surveys than traditional neighborhood schools both years. Sznewajs said he expects that will change over the years, as all schools become more familiar with the annual survey.

The report provides data on a district-wide level, but not on individual schools. However, school-level data will be made available online later this year in a revamped version of Ingenuity’s interactive map of school arts offerings.

Ingenuity also issued a series of recommendations, starting with hiring more arts instructors. At a bare minimum, the report asks for at least one certified arts instructor per school; Rossero said he hoped the 84 additional arts teachers would ensure that all schools in Chicago had at least one arts teacher on staff but could not confirm whether that would be the case next fall. Other recommendations include increased training

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opportunities for principals and teachers; the creation of a system to measure arts instruction; and locating new public and private funding for the arts.

One key finding in the report is on the wide range in programs offered by arts partners that work in schools. The majority of these programs are one-time field trips or performances that, “while valuable and may address an identified school need, signal little consistent or ongoing student access to partner programs,” according to the report.

Ingenuity points to art residency programs in schools as an alternative which provides “a deep arts learning opportunity” for students. Just over a quarter of schools reported having an art residency in 2012-13.

Sznewajs said outside arts partnerships make sense for schools in a city like Chicago, with its vast wealth of “cultural resources” that schools could tap into. He stressed that his group’s focus on schools partnering with outside arts organizations is in no ways meant to undermine the role of certified arts instructors in the classroom.

“If you want to grow the arts, it starts with having a certified arts instructor on staff. They’re the anchor of everything,” he said.

Still, the attention to partnerships has caused some concern among arts instructors in CPS. In late April, the CTU’s arts committee filed a grievance alleging that some schools were using outside arts partners to replace instruction by certified teachers, even though that instruction isn’t supposed to count toward the 120 minutes per week requirement.

John Perryman, who chairs the CTU arts committee, said some principals were leaving students alone with outside arts partners. CPS officials did not respond to questions about the grievance.