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Arts education shouldn't have to be justified



People look at the works of Nassau County high school students in an art competition at the Nassau County Museum of Art in Roslyn Harbor in 2024. Credit: Newsday/J. Conrad Williams Jr.

By Anthony Mazzocchi

Guest essay

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This guest essay reflects the views of Anthony Mazzocchi, president and CEO of Kaufman Music Center in New York City.

New York occupies a unique place in the cultural life of this country. From the jazz clubs of Harlem to the stages of Broadway, from Woodstock to Jackson Pollock on the East End to the countless musicians, actors, dancers, writers and artists working in communities across the state today, New York has long served as one of the world's great centers of artistic expression. We celebrate this heritage and market it. It is part of the story we tell ourselves about what makes New York special.

But none of this happened by accident.

Every artist we celebrate today was once an unknown child whose talents were recognized, encouraged and developed long before their names appeared in lights. Before there was a Broadway performer, there was a school play. Before there was a concert soloist, there was a music classroom. Before there was a cultural leader, there was a teacher, a mentor, a community.

We often celebrate the finished product while overlooking the pathway that made it possible — one that is becoming increasingly fragile.

As school districts across New York keep grappling with budget pressures and difficult choices, arts programs are on the defensive more often. This year, Gov. Kathy Hochul's budget proposed [\\$111 million](#) for the New York State Council on the Arts — more than \$60 million less than the year prior that prompted immediate pushback from arts organizations across the state to restore funding. Meantime, the state Education Department now has just a single officer overseeing arts education for more than 2.5 million students, according to [the New York State Alliance for Arts Education](#). Individually, these decisions might seem small, but collectively, they reflect a

growing assumption that the arts are supplemental; valuable if resources allow, but ultimately secondary to the core mission of education.

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For a state that prides itself on being a cultural capital, that assumption should concern us.

The artists and cultural leaders we celebrate today did not emerge from nowhere. They developed because someone invested in them before the acclaim. A teacher noticed something. A school offered a class. The pathway into the arts has always begun with a first encounter, and for countless young people that encounter happens at

school.

New York’s cultural identity is often discussed as if it were a permanent asset, but it is not. Every generation inherits a cultural legacy, reshapes it and passes it forward. The artists who will define New York’s future, sitting in classrooms today, will be developed over years through exposure, practice, mentorship and opportunity.

Cultural leadership is not inherited — it is taught.

This is why I find myself increasingly frustrated by debates that attempt to justify arts education exclusively through test scores, graduation rates or workforce development metrics. Those outcomes matter, and [many studies show the arts contribute positively to them](#). But such a focus misses something much larger: Arts education gives young people an opportunity to discover talents, passions, identities and possibilities they may not have known existed.

Ultimately, the Council on the Arts received \$161 million in the budget — an increase won through sustained advocacy and a recognition that the arts matter.

As we debate budget priorities heading forward, let’s remember that investing in arts education makes the arts of tomorrow possible. If New York truly is the cultural capital of the world — a title that comes with immense responsibility — it’s time to govern in a way that supports the next generation of artists.

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