

# ACTIONABLE STRATEGIES FOR HIGH-QUALITY OUT OF SCHOOL TIME ARTS PROGRAMS

## Principle 5: Culminating Events

### *From Studio to Stage: Meaningful Showcases of Youth Artistry*

## Overview



Multipurpose out-of-school time (OST) organizations routinely look for ways to recognize and celebrate young people—through awards like Youth of the Month or through activities that already come with built-in public moments, such as sports games or STEM competitions.

Arts programming, however, has traditionally been treated differently. Typical arts and crafts activities in multipurpose OST organizations rarely lead to public products or events, so organizations often don't create opportunities to showcase youth artistry. But as multipurpose OST organizations elevate the quality of their arts programming, **public culminating events become essential.**

High-quality arts programs find ways to showcase youth art: art exhibitions, listening parties, film screenings, and more. These events also bring youth art into the community—performing in public spaces, creating public murals, sharing films on social media, or participating in public competitions.

When done well, these events offer young people formative, pre-professional artistic experiences. They allow youth to be recognized by peers, families, and the broader community—and to realize that their creative expression matters. Culminating events, whether held in community venues, competitions, or online, can also spark **Generative Connections**, opening doors to new networks and opportunities in and beyond the arts.

This is how multipurpose OST organizations can implement **Principle 5: Programs culminate in high-quality events with real audiences.**

### About the Youth Arts Initiative

The Youth Arts Initiative (YAI), which took place between 2012-2022 and was funded by The Wallace Foundation, aimed to address the gap in access to high-quality arts by developing a sustainable and scalable model of arts programming in multipurpose OST organizations. YAI was developed by the Boys & Girls Clubs of America—an OST provider that offers community-based low-cost multipurpose OST programs in under-resourced communities that have been economically and socially marginalized. YAI is based on the **10 Success Principles for High-Quality OST Arts Programs** derived from community arts organizations, youth participants, and youth development experts.

# Why Culminating Events Are Essential for High-Quality Arts Programs

Research from the Youth Arts Initiative (YAI) shows that culminating events play several important roles—for young people, for families, and for the organization.

## → MOTIVATING YOUTH ART-SKILL DEVELOPMENT

In high-quality arts programs, teaching artists often design long-term projects that lead to culminating events. These events motivate youth to attend consistently, practice their craft, and stretch their artistic skills. They also create opportunities to build non-artistic skills—public speaking, time management, collaboration, and meeting deadlines. Performances and exhibitions expose youth to professional art spaces, costumes, equipment, and other artists in their community. After each event, teaching artists may facilitate reflection: What worked well? What would they change next time?

## → ENSURING FAMILY BUY-IN

In traditional multipurpose OST organizations, families often pick up youth at times convenient for their schedules. High-quality arts programs, however, require commitment—youth may need to stay for full sessions or rehearsals that extend beyond when families typically take them home. Families may not always understand this shift at first. But YAI research found that once families saw their children perform or exhibit their work, they understood the value and became strong supporters of the time commitment and their children’s artistic growth. Teaching artists also used culminating events to engage families. One digital arts program, for example, hosted family photoshoots where youth photographed, with support from the teaching artist, each other's families and turned the images into holiday cards.

## → BUILDING AN ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE THAT VALUES YOUTH ART

When organizational staff and leaders saw youth artwork showcased, their appreciation and buy-in for arts programming deepened. They began to understand how high-quality arts programming differs from traditional arts-and-crafts, and why these programs require different structures, materials, and expectations. YAI research found that these events also generate excitement among other youth in the organization. Some multipurpose OST organizations played recorded performances on lobby screens or displayed youth artwork throughout the building, sparking peer interest and recruitment. This visibility helped create a safer, more supportive environment for young artists.

## → EXPANDING COMMUNITY VISIBILITY AND SUPPORT FOR YOUTH ART

Culminating events also strengthen community engagement. Our research found that when youth art was showcased in public venues—such as performing arts centers, malls, and film festivals—it drew attention to the program and the organization. Multipurpose OST organizations invited board members, local media, and arts-interested donors, which helped deepen partnerships and support sustainability.

## Core Challenges for Multipurpose OST Organizations

### CAPACITY AND RESOURCES

Multipurpose OST organizations new to high-quality arts programming may not know how to plan a culminating event or may lack staff time and resources. YAI programs often relied on teaching artists to lead event planning, but artists’ time was limited and needed to be compensated.

### BALANCING INCLUSION AND READINESS

Programs often wrestled with how to balance inclusivity with artistic readiness. Teaching artists wanted to maintain high expectations and ensure youth were prepared to present. And, as organizations saw the power of culminating events, they sometimes requested more frequent performances for fundraising or organizational needs. Teaching artists set boundaries to protect youth readiness and the integrity of the artistic process—especially since many youth were beginners.

### DEFINING A HIGH-QUALITY EVENT

Multipurpose OST organizations and teaching artists sometimes had different visions of what “high-quality” meant. With limited resources, these differences required negotiation. For example, one organization envisioned a large showcase at a local performing arts center featuring all the organization’s art programs. Meanwhile, the organization’s fashion-design teaching artist preferred taking youth to participate in a professional fashion show outside their community. Both visions had merit, but required alignment.

# Practical Strategies for Multipurpose OST Organizations



## START WITH INTERNAL SHOWCASES TO BUILD CONFIDENCE

Teaching artists often built youth confidence first through smaller, art-form-specific events—displaying visual art in hallways, hosting listening parties, or sharing works-in-progress with peers and families—before moving on to more public displays and performances.



## SUPPORT TEACHING ARTISTS IN PLANNING EVENTS

Teaching artists needed support in planning and executing culminating events. The multipurpose OST organizations in our research created arts program director positions to oversee their arts programming, and they often organized culminating events in consultation with the teaching artists.



## LEVERAGE ARTS EXPERTISE INSIDE AND OUTSIDE YOUR ORGANIZATION

Multipurpose OST organizations new to arts-focused events should collaborate closely with teaching artists and arts-trained staff. Community arts partners may offer low-cost or donated space, equipment, or expertise. These partnerships also expand audiences and deepen community connections.



## CAPITALIZE ON EXISTING COMMUNITY EVENTS OR COMPETITIONS

Culminating events don't always need to be large or expensive. Youth can participate in existing competitions, perform at community events, or engage in service-oriented arts activities, such as murals or performances for younger children or elders.



## SHOWCASE MULTIPLE ART FORMS IN CROSS-PROGRAM EVENTS

Multipurpose OST organizations can bring multiple art forms together for periodic large community showcases, highlighting the breadth of youth creativity across programs and combining resources across programs.

## The Bottom Line

Public culminating events validate youth work, strengthen community connections, and create powerful moments of achievement. They also build visibility and support for high-quality arts programming—both inside the organization and beyond it.

# The 10 Principles for High-Quality Arts Programs

Research funded/supported by The Wallace Foundation codified key practices for high-quality arts programs into [10 Success Principles](#) for high-quality arts programs, developed in partnership with community arts organizations, youth participants, and youth development experts.

## 1 PROFESSIONAL ARTISTS AS INSTRUCTORS

Programs are led by practicing artists, compensated fairly, and supported in their professional growth.

## 2 EXECUTIVE COMMITMENT

Leaders make a public, sustained commitment to high-quality arts programming.

## 3 DEDICATED, INSPIRING SPACES

Arts programs take place in welcoming environments that affirm the value of art and artists.

## 4 CULTURE OF HIGH EXPECTATIONS

Programs respect creative expression and affirm youth participants as artists.

## 5 CULMINATING EVENTS

Programs culminate in high-quality public events with real audiences.

## 6 POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS

Adult mentors and peers foster belonging and acceptance.

## 7 YOUTH VOICE AND LEADERSHIP

Participants actively shape programs and take on meaningful leadership roles.

## 8 HANDS-ON SKILL BUILDING

Programs emphasize skill development using current equipment and technology.

## 9 STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

Programs build networks of support for youth and the arts.

## 10 SAFE SPACES

Programs provide physically and emotionally safe environments.



# Learn More!



## ACCESS OUR MINI-BRIEF SERIES

RFA and MAI have authored a series of mini-briefs for each principle, drawing from our research with the Youth Arts Initiative (YAI). We have also published several reports from YAI. You can find the mini-briefs on RFA's website [here](#), MAI's website [here](#), and the reports [here](#).



## JOIN AN OPEN HOUSE CONVERSATION

RFA and MAI will host Open House conversations for organizations and individuals that would like to learn more about incorporating practical lessons from YAI into their programs. We anticipate conducting the Open Houses in **fall 2026**. Stay tuned for more information!



## SET UP TIME TO CHAT

If you have any questions about the content of this brief, or if you would like to share your experience in **funding, building, and sustaining** youth arts programming, we invite you to reach out to RFA and MAI. The authors, **Tracey Hartmann** and **Wendy McClanahan**, can be reached at [thartmann@researchforaction.org](mailto:thartmann@researchforaction.org) and [wmcclanahan@maieval.com](mailto:wmcclanahan@maieval.com).



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This research was commissioned and funded by The Wallace Foundation as part of its mission to support and share effective ideas and practices.