

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

Principle 8: Hands-On Skill Building

Moving Beyond Popsicle Sticks and Googly Eyes: How Current Art Equipment and Technology Can Improve Arts Programming

Overview

In many multipurpose out-of-school time (OST) organizations, “art” often equates to “arts and crafts.” The supplies are typically markers, construction paper, and glue with googly eyes, with popsicle sticks thrown in for fun. These materials are affordable, safe, and easy to clean up. While arts-and-crafts activities have their place, they rarely offer youth the opportunity to develop genuine artistic mastery.

Art skill development programs are different. They are defined by **Principle 8: Programs focus on hands-on skill building using current equipment and technology**. In the Youth Arts Initiative (YAI), this principle meant shifting from craft supplies to digital cameras, sound mixing boards, sewing machines, sprung dance floors, graphic design and sound mixing programs, and computers.

However, for multipurpose OST organizations operating in resource-constrained environments, purchasing and maintaining expensive equipment and technology can feel out of reach. How can organizations justify the cost of a sound booth when they are stretching budgets to meet the interests of all the young people in their neighborhood, not to mention paying for snacks and staffing?

Research from the YAI demonstrates that investing in current and more specialized art equipment and technology is not just about skill development, it is a powerful driver of youth engagement and retention.



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 Equipment and Technology Matter for High-Quality Arts Programs

In the YAI research, the use of high-quality equipment by multipurpose OST organizations was more than a luxury; it was a central component of the art program's success. Using high-quality equipment matters because it:



DRIVES ENGAGEMENT

The presence of near-professional materials created a “buzz” in the building that piqued curiosity and drew youth into the program. Tweens were drawn to “fancy new cameras,” computers, and instruments they couldn't access elsewhere. As one film participant noted, “You get to learn techniques about the camera... we get to hold the camera and stuff... I've never held a camera like that before.” This access to high-quality materials also kept young people connected to the program.



SIGNALS THE VALUE OF THE ARTS

Providing high-quality materials sends a message to youth that their work is important and that they believe they have potential to create professional quality work. Youth expressed appreciation for the “professional” nature of the supplies, noting that the access to good paintbrushes, oil pastels, and cameras made the program feel different from school or other multipurpose OST organization activities.



ENABLES HIGH EXPECTATIONS

You cannot hold high expectations for skill development (Principle 4) if youth lack the tools to meet them. High-quality materials allow youth to produce original artwork and master technical skills. For example, in fashion design classes, having access to real sewing machines enabled youth to move beyond simple hand-sewing projects to constructing complex garments.

Core Challenges for Multipurpose OST Organizations

Outfitting art programs with high-quality equipment, materials, and technology is one of the costliest aspects of arts programming, because of:

INITIAL AND ONGOING COSTS

High-quality arts programs require significant upfront investment in technology (e.g., computers, cameras, and software) and ongoing funding for consumables (e.g., paints and fabrics) and software for maintenance.

INFRASTRUCTURE LIMITATIONS

Multipurpose OST organizations often face structural barriers to supporting technology or safeguarding materials. In the YAI, some sites discovered their existing internet bandwidth was insufficient for digital arts software, or that they lacked appropriate ventilation for visual arts materials. Other sites needed to purchase or reallocate storage for program materials.

ORGANIZATIONAL TENSIONS

The introduction of expensive equipment for a specific group of youth can create questions within the organization. Other staff members, accustomed to working with limited resources, sometimes questioned why the arts program received “fancy new cameras” while other program areas struggled for basic supplies.

Practical Strategies for Multipurpose OST Organizations

What can multipurpose OST organizations that want to increase the quality of their arts programs do? There are four promising approaches that these organizations can use to provide high-quality equipment without breaking the bank.



SHARING EQUIPMENT

Multipurpose OST organizations do not need one piece of expensive equipment for every child. Some organizations successfully implemented a “station” model, where youth rotated through different activities. For instance, in a screen-printing class with only one printing press, the teaching artist created stations for design, screen prep, and printing. These stations kept all youth engaged in hands-on work without requiring a press for every student.



CREATIVE SOURCING AND PARTNERSHIPS

Donations can be a lifeline, but they must be cultivated strategically to avoid a “junk” trap. Donated, broken instruments, or outdated computers frustrated youth and wasted valuable instructional time. If the tool doesn’t work, it undermines the high expectations multipurpose OST organizations are trying to set. Instead, YAI sites successfully solicited donations of new equipment from industry partners, such as film companies or technology firms, whose goals aligned with theirs. They also used powerful, free open-source software (like Blender for 3D creation) that allowed youth to learn professional-grade skills on standard computers.



MOBILITY

If multipurpose OST organizations cannot afford a full set of equipment for every site, they should move the equipment to the youth—or the youth to the equipment. Some organizations purchased laptops and MIDI keyboards that a teaching artist transported between sites. While effective for reach, this transportation requires logistical support to ensure equipment isn’t damaged during travel. Alternatively, organizations invested in one or more high-tech “hub” studios and transported interested youth from various sites to that location, particularly for summer programs.

The Bottom Line

Transitioning from “arts and crafts” to “skill-building” requires the right materials. While the cost of equipment is a real barrier, YAI research shows that through strategic purchasing, partnerships, and creative resource management, multipurpose OST organizations can put professional-grade tools into the hands of youth. Doing so doesn’t just improve the art—it validates the artist.

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

Positive relationships with adult mentors and peers foster a sense of belonging and acceptance.

7 YOUTH VOICE AND LEADERSHIP

Youth participants actively shape programs and assume 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 and wmcclanahan@maieval.com.



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