

THE IMPACT OF THE GREAT RECESSION OF 2007 TO 2009 ON PERCEPTIONS OF THE VALUE OF ARTS EDUCATION AND ABILITY TO GAIN FUNDING IN NEW YORK CITY

Chris Ramos
Pace University
cramos@pace.edu

Dan Baugher
Pace University
dbaugher@pace.edu

ABSTRACT

This paper describes how the great recession of 2007 to 2009, in the view of school administrators, impacted ability to gain funding for arts education and perceptions of the value of arts education by parents, superiors, colleagues and the Board of Education in the Borough of Manhattan of New York City. The study is qualitative and includes data from interviews and surveys completed by school administrators from 13 of the 24 schools designated in Manhattan as The Center for Arts Education partners resulting in a 54.2% response rate for the designated schools. Most administrators felt that the School Board moved toward a more negative view. When a change in attitude was perceived, colleagues were viewed as moving to a more negative view and superiors were viewed as moving to a more positive view. The most striking change in the perception of school administrators was the stronger position of parents as advocates for arts education during the recession. About 2/3 of the administrators felt the recession hurt their ability to gain funding during and after the recession while 1/3 saw no change. Publicly available budget data aligned with administrator views especially for the second year of the recession when the arts education budget was cut and the overall education budget was not. Administrators split about 50-50 on whether the recession had a negative impact or no impact on the perceived value of arts education after the recession.

INTRODUCTION

According to the National Bureau of Economic Research (Bram, Orr, Rich, Rosen and Song, 2009), the United States entered into an economic recession in December 2007. Later in the fall season of 2008, the condition of the U.S. economy rapidly deteriorated; but then finally leveled off in July 2009. The crisis that led to the country's economic downturn was the collapse and failure of several of the biggest financial institutions in the U.S. including Bear Stearns, Fannie Mae, Freddie Mac, Lehman Brothers, Washington Mutual and American International Group (AIG), plus the unforeseeable difficulties in the automobile industry (Billiteri, 2008).

During this economic crisis, the state and local government sectors across the nation scrambled to fill budget gaps by reducing their funding expenditures. Even with relief funds from the federal government in the form of a stimulus package via the *American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA)*, the monetary assistance just partly cushioned the recession-induced shortfalls in many

state and local governments' budget gaps (Bradbury, 2010). To accomplish this task, states and local administrations responded by implementing certain measures, such as increasing tax rates, drawing down reserves and cutting entitlement programs, which included education - particularly arts education programs.

Under the tenure of the current and past Presidents of the U.S., the education sector has always been an important part of the country's budgetary expenditures and support for the sector holds one of the highest priorities in every administration. In the past five decades, reform after reform has been explored. As Fowler (1988) reiterated in *Can We Rescue the Arts for America's Children?*, most reforms intensified the study of English, Mathematics, Science and History, often at the expense of Arts Education programs.

The recent 2008 recession federal stimulus package, unfortunately, is slowly shrinking due to the indolent recovery of the economy. Many states' school districts are ultimately tapping from the separate 10 billion dollar Education Jobs Fund, also known as "*edujobs*," designated to help states gradually recover from the deep recession (McNeil, 2011).

The economic downturn led to a massive reduction in spending by the publicly funded school districts, which resulted in lay-offs of thousands of teachers and support staff plus the partial elimination of school curricula (Coddington, 2010). Historically, it has often been a challenge for states to sustain their arts education programs (Nygren, 2003). This was made more evident by the recession. In many cases, arts programs were among the first to go (Coddington, 2010). As Fowler has reiterated (1989, p. 92), "*all too often, arts are assigned the lowest priority.*" While the majority of the relief funds went to help the education sector, at nearly 75 percent, the funding priority went to math, reading, writing and other subjects while funding for arts education declined (Norton, 2008).

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

According to Remer (2010, p.81), "*arts education has always been difficult to define, perhaps now more than ever.*" To complicate the matter further, labels such as *arts as education, arts in education, arts for education, arts aesthetic education, arts for integration* and *arts for learning* disarrange the landscape (Remer, 2010). With different tags attached to the concept, the question for arts educators is how to present an intriguing argument that will embrace what arts education is.

Today, the nationwide school system has adopted a general view of what constitutes the standard goal of arts education. Arts education is to develop a knowledge base among the four arts disciplines – dance, music, theater, and visual arts – put-in-place during the Clinton administration in 1994 and set forth under the National Standards Core Curricula (Berube, 1999).

Arts education programs in public schools have gone through unpredictable cycles of funding sources from individuals, corporations, foundations, and federal, state, and local governments. Even before the recession, federal arts spending was cut by 2 percent; the reasoning behind the cut, arguably, was partly due to the policy makers and administrators who "*still see arts as a frill or, at best, something that needs to be justified*" (Bresler, 1998 p.13)

While the administration under G.W. Bush recognized the importance and equal billing of arts together with math and reading, other empirical works have demonstrated that high-stakes testing legitimized a culture that sacrifices resources and time for arts education in the name of standards (Cavanagh, 2006; *Center on Educational Policy*, 2006; McNeil and Valenzuela, 2001). The move to standardized testing imposed high-stakes on accountability through testing in

mathematics and language arts (Heilig, Cole, and Aguilar, 2010) which motivated school administrators to shift their attention away from arts education.

Policy makers in Congress have continually questioned the spending of millions of dollars on the only arts inclined federal agency, the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), countering that the country does not even have enough money to effectively deal with national issues such as the illegal immigration crisis and street crimes (Representative Philip M. Crane in Bresler, 1998). This appears contrary to the views of parents. A Harris Poll conducted in 2005, among 90 respondents, showed that the arts are considered vital to a well-rounded education for all students; and that nine in ten parents of school-age children opposed budget cutbacks on arts programs (Paige and Huckabee, 2005).

With funding initiatives in arts education such as *Goals 2000 Arts Education Partnership*, a renewed interest in arts education funding has emerged (Bresler, 1998). The NEA initiative, *Arts in Education Program*, created in the mid-1980s funneled funds into school system arts education programs throughout the U.S. to promote arts to children and young adults (Smith, 1995). The current controversial legislation mandate, *No Child Left Behind*, has increased additional federal funding to those schools “in need of improvement” (Mantel, 2005) but holds those school accountable for raising the achievement level of all students in two years’ time with no focus on arts education (Center for Educational Policy, 2006).

Given the budgetary constraints in the federal education reform plus the recent economic downturn of 2007 to 2009, states and localities all across the nation, including New York State, have been faced with cutbacks in appropriations to its arts education programs. Even with the additional funding from the *American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA)* to help cope with the recession budget gap, funding the much needed school arts education programs is the challenge that most or all states and localities across the country face today.

In New York City, the fiscal funding crisis in the delivery of arts education programs to hundreds of public schools has its roots in the City’s bankruptcy in the mid-1970s (Berube, 1999). The funding initiative created in 1992 by the Annenberg Foundation, which led to the creation of a nonprofit organization called *The Center for Arts Education (CAE)*, has helped the staggering arts education programs in the public schools (Fineberg, 1997).

With the 12 million dollars set aside by the Annenberg Foundation, the initiative called the *Annenberg Challenge* dared other philanthropic entities to match its grant with two dollars for every Annenberg dollar, thereby raising the stakes to 36 million dollars (Fineberg, 1997). The funding of *Challenge Arts*, between 1996 through 2002, raised the expectations for not just New York City public school students but also students around the country (*Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University*, 2003). The generous grants from the Annenberg Foundation came in 1995, during development of the national standards and assessments debates about the effects of arts education, thus, creating national attention on arts education (Fineberg, 1997).

During the period of the *Annenberg Challenge* project, the newly created *The Center for Arts Education (CAE)*, as stipulated in the initiative, was held accountable for the distribution of the 12 million dollar grant obtained from the Annenberg Foundation. This challenge grant created an opportunity for New York City public schools to apply for partnership grants between individual schools and cultural organizations to use the arts as catalysts for whole-school curriculum change or reform. This resulted in an increased thrust and surge in arts education directly serving more than 54,000 students in most Manhattan inner city public schools (Fineberg, 1997).

In addition to the funding initiative from the Annenberg Foundation, the former mayor of New York City, Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, added an additional funding in 1997 of 75 million dollars. The funding initiative of the project called, *Project Arts* (Arts Restoration through the Schools), came from the Board of Education (Moskowitz, 2003). During the period of the *Annenberg Challenge* and *Project Arts* from 1996 through 2002, arts education reached a peak throughout New York City's public school system.

Unfortunately, the decade of progress in arts education reform in New York City's public school system came and went. The *Annenberg Challenge* fund had been depleted and the once known New York City's *Project Arts* was replaced by *ArtsCount* where accountability and metrics measurements are the centerpiece of the new arts education initiative -- formed by the New York City Department of Education in 2007 (Israel, 2009)

According to Israel (2010), the launching of *ArtsCount* came with a price -- the elimination of a successful initiative, *Project Arts*, which provided a dedicated per-pupil funding for arts education at all schools. *ArtsCount* no longer required principals to spend dedicated per-pupil funding solely on arts education -- meaning the principals have the sole discretion as to how and where to allocate the available funds.

The decline in arts budgets in the past several years has forced principals and administrators to make very difficult decisions regarding the allocation of education dollars. Even before the onset of the fiscal crisis in late 2007, the funding decline in arts education can be traced to a set of educational policies initiated by administrative decisions that did not give priority to arts education (Israel, 2011)

According to Moskowitz (2003), even with the active role provided by a well-known, high stature figure like Caroline Kennedy, children of New York City still did not receive the arts education that they need and deserve. Further, no matter how good or bad the economic status of the country, experts note that "*New York City does not have a very good record in sustaining any educational reform for much longer than its outside funding resources*" (Fineberg, 1997, p.37).

This lack of enthusiasm towards arts education funding in New York City's public schools can be traced back to the notion that arts education is more of a frill than part of a core curriculum in the public school system. It seems clear that the perceived value of arts education is a key element in its funding.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study is to analyze the impact of the economic downturn of the Great Recession of 2007 to 2009 on the perceived value of arts education by parents, superiors, colleagues, and the Board of Education in the Borough of Manhattan of New York City. The recession's impact on the ability of administrators to gain arts education funding is also considered. The study uses a qualitative research methodology where perceptions and reactions are explored through interviews and when interviews were not possible, with a survey.

The study focuses on two budget years, the 2009-2010 budget year, which was set during the second year of the recession, and the 2010-2011 budget year, which followed the recession. While the 2008-2009 budget was also set during the recession, on April 17, 2008, it was set just a few months after the recession officially began. It is not considered because the full impact of the recession was not felt until the fall of 2008, making the 2009-2010 budget the first budget that would be made with full knowledge of it. The City's education budget for 2010-2011 was set on February 8, 2010, at a time when the recession was still being felt though officially over.

As a qualitative study, the study seeks to find answers to problem statements and not support for specific hypotheses. While the focus is on New York City Borough of Manhattan schools with substantial arts education priorities, the questions which the study seeks to answer are generic to all public school systems in the United States. They are:

Problem 1: Did the Great Recession of 2007 to 2009 alter perceptions of the value of arts education on the part of parents, superiors, colleagues and the Board of Education during the recession or its perceived overall value following the recession?

Problem 2: Did the Great Recession of 2007 to 2009 impact the ability of school administrators to gain funding for arts education?

METHOD

The study relies upon qualitative data obtained in one-on-one, semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with arts education administrators. Surveys were mailed to schools where an interview was not possible. The respondents were interviewed for approximately 30 minutes as administrators had very limited time to participate in the study.

SUBJECTS

In the New York City Borough of Manhattan, 24 public schools are designated as The Center for Arts Education partners. These are schools where arts education is a priority. Administrators of these schools were contacted to solicit their views. Given the very restricted access to school administrators that exists in New York City, the goal was to get the view of one administrator in each school. The targeted list of schools was obtained from *The Center for Arts Education* website (<http://www.cae-nyc.org/>) through a search to determine which schools were designated as arts education partners and shown to have an affiliation with *The Center for Arts Education*.

In order to participate, the respondent had to be an administrator, a director or principal of the school, with knowledge about the school's arts education program, its budget, funding sources and human resources. Administrators were contacted by letter, follow-up phone calls, and email and asked to participate in an interview and, if unavailable, asked to complete a survey with the same questions asked during the interview. The goal was to seek the view of one administrator in each school. Thirteen administrators from 13 different schools provided responses either via survey or the interview resulting in 54.2% of the designated schools having representation.

INTERVIEW AND SURVEY QUESTIONS

The interview was structured but allowed for open-ended response so additional clarification could be gained. The interview and the survey used the same questionnaire.

The questionnaire was divided into five sections geared to answering the problems posed by the study. It also asked if the school had an arts education program and a budget before, during, and after the recession. The questionnaire sections were (1) Existence of Prior/Current School Arts Education Program and Budget (2) Impact of Recession on the Ability to Gain Arts Education Funding, (3) Impact of Recession on Perceived Value of Arts Education during the Recession, (4) Impact of Recession on Perceived Value of Arts Education following the Recession, and (5) Final Impressions.

The survey had one additional section at the beginning not included in the interview. That section asked the respondent to indicate their administrative position (e.g., Principal) and school

category (e.g., K-8). This was not necessary in the interview as respondents were known. In the survey, all respondents were anonymous.

RESULTS

Answers to the questionnaire were collected either from the interview or through return of the survey via the mail or email. Of the 13 respondents, five were interviewed and eight returned a survey. All schools had an Arts Education Program during the two years considered (2009-2010, 2010-2011) as well as during the first budget year during the recession (2008-2009). Of the 13 schools, 12 had a program in the budget year preceding the recession (2007-2008). The school without an arts program budget in 2007-2008 did not have funding because it was a new school and did not exist in 2007-2008. All respondents had budget responsibility for arts education in their school. Ten were principals, one was a vice-principal, and two were directors.

The first problem asks whether the Great Recession altered perceptions of the value of arts education by key constituencies including parents, superiors, colleagues, and the Board of Education during the recession or its overall perceived value following the recession. Figure 1 shows how administrators perceived changes in attitudes during the recession for each group. The columns running from left to right show: more value, less value and no change.

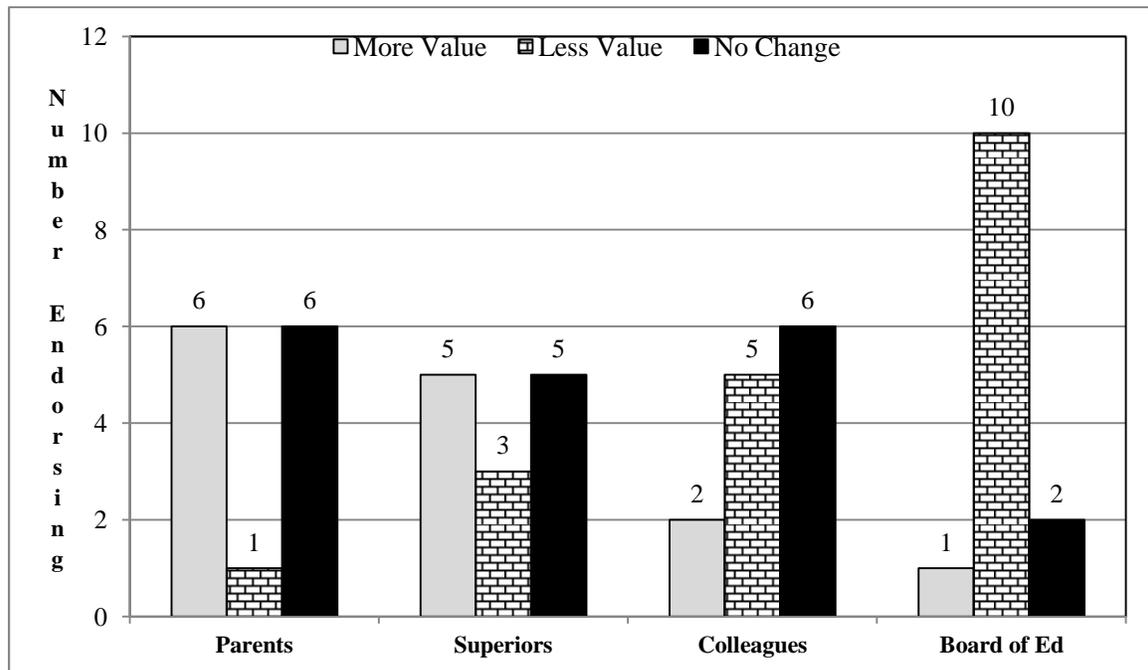


Figure 1: Number of administrators who perceived improved, worse, or no change in attitudes toward the value of arts education during the recession for parents, superiors, colleagues and the Board of Education.

The greatest change in attitude perceived by administrators during the recession was found for the Board of Education where 10 of 13 or 76.9% felt the Board moved to a view, during the recession, that arts education was of less value. While no change in the view of parents, superiors, and colleagues was perceived by 5-6 administrators, of the more than half who perceived a change, more felt colleagues moved to a position of less value than more value. Colleagues were defined as administrators in other areas such as mathematics. In contrast, those who perceived a change for supervisors felt they moved to perceiving arts education as having more value during the recession than less value.

For the seven administrators, or 53.8%, who perceived a change in parents' views, six felt parents moved, during the recession, to a perception of greater value for arts education and only one perceived that they moved to a position of less value. The interviews added clarity to this change. Administrators expressed surprise that parents had become their greatest ally in gaining arts education funding and were grateful for their increase in support. They felt parents were an important, new, and needed ally for them as they sought increases in arts education funding. In particular, parents were especially interested in student performances, like dance and music, and the integration of visual arts, as in painting and drawing, within dance and music performances.

In their assessment of the impact of the recession on the perceived value of arts education following the recession, administrators showed a mixed response. Seven of 13 administrators, or 53.8%, felt the recession had a negative impact on perceptions of the overall value of arts education while six, or 46.2% perceived no negative impact. Four of the seven who perceived a negative impact felt the impact of the recession was very negative while two felt it was moderately negative, with only one feeling it was only somewhat negative.

Thus, the answer to the first problem is: It was the perception of administrators that the Board of Education moved to a more negative view of arts education value during the recession; colleagues also were felt to show more of a negative shift toward arts education value than a positive one. Superiors were felt to show a more positive shift than a negative one (when a shift was believed to occur).

Parents were felt to show the greatest shift to a positive view of the constituencies considered, and were thought to be the greatest new ally of administrators in gaining arts education funding. Administrators were almost equally split on changes in perceived value after the recession, with about half perceiving no negative change and another half believing there was negative change. Most of those who saw negative change felt it to be moderate to very negative.

The second problem asks about the impact of the Great Recession on the ability to gain Arts Education funding during the second year of the recession (2009-2010) and after the recession (2010-2011). Budgets for New York City Public Schools are typically approved in February-May of the calendar year (e.g., March, 2008) and go into effect in July of that year for the next academic year (e.g., 2008-2009).

Eight of the administrators, or 61.5%, felt funding during the recession was negatively impacted by the recession while five, or 38.5% felt there was no impact. Six of the eight who perceived a negative impact, or 75%, felt the impact was very significant. Looking forward to the year after the recession, nine administrators or 69.2% felt the recession negatively affected the ability to gain funds following the recession; five of the nine who perceived a negative impact, or 55.2% felt the recession had a very significant negative effect. An additional three believed the negative impact was moderate and only one felt the effect was less than moderate. Their mixed views parallel the published data which also shows mixed outcomes in the actual budgets.

Publicly available data shows that the arts education budget was cut by 4% during 2009-2010 (the second year of the recession) and showed a 1.3% increase in 2010-2011 (the year after the recession) (New York City Board of Education, 2011). In comparison, the total New York City education budget showed a 3.52% increase in 2009-2010 (New York City Board of Education, 2010, Feb. 8) and 1.58% increase in 2010-2011 (New York City Department of Education, 2011, Feb. 16). Thus, it can be seen that when the recession was in full throttle, the arts education

budget was cut while the total education budget was not. Following the recession, the budget was allocated a similar increase to that of the total budget.

During the interviews, administrators noted that arts education continued to be a low priority in funding relative to mathematics and language arts during the recession and felt it could not change much in priority because of pressures to show strong scores on standardized tests. With the continued high visibility of test score averages in these two areas, administrators did not expect any significant improvement in the near term or perhaps longer. Often, they noted that evaluations of their schools hinged almost entirely on their school averages in these two areas.

In the closing section of the interviews and in the survey, administrators could make additional comments. Most comments were negative in character. A sample of some is provided below:

*Very negative. . . Sacrifice . . . No change. . . Downsize . . .
Arts, is it still alive? Scapegoat! Less accessibility to the arts . . .
Doing more with less . . .
Kids who need more always get less.
Less arts education equals decrease in performance.
Stifling student's creativity! Increase corporate sponsorship!!!*

Taken in context, it is clear that the arts education budget was hit hard in the second year of the recession. Given its small size, it is understandable that administrators felt that the changes were very impactful and that arts education had no change in priority and maybe a reduction in priority.

Thus, the answer to the second problem is: Views were mixed on the impact of the Great Recession on arts education funding with 61.5% feeling a negative impact during the recession and 69.2% perceiving a negative impact following the recession. Public data on budgets confirm that arts education budgets were cut by 4% during the second year of the recession and increased by 1.3% in the year after the recession which may explain the view by some that funding was not affected. The overall budget continued to grow in these years showing that arts education budgets can be expected to have cutbacks during difficult economic times while others may not.

DISCUSSION

While this study is a qualitative one with a limited amount of data, the administrators represented more than half of the key arts education public schools in the New York City Borough of Manhattan. There was a fair degree of consistency in their views on the recession. The Board of Education was clearly felt to have moved to a more negative view during the recession. Also, there was consistency in the view that parents had moved to seeing arts education as of more value during the recession, for those who believed parents changed their views.

On funding, the views are mixed. Almost 2/3 felt there was a negative impact during the second year of the recession and 1/3 felt there was no impact on funding. A similar result was true for funding after the recession. From public data, it is clear that the arts education budget was cut when the overall school budget was not cut during the second budget year of the recession, suggesting that it is vulnerable during hard times.

New York City is the largest school system in the United State (Institute of Education Sciences National Center for Education Statistics, 2010) with a budget in the billions of dollars for education. Its budget for arts education is in the millions of dollars and a fractional percentage of its total budget. Over the two years considered, the average total budget for City education was

\$18,543,675 (in millions) (New York City Board of Education, 2010, Feb. 8; New York City Department of Education, 2011, Feb. 16) and the arts education average budget was \$314 (in millions) (New York City Board of Education, 2011), less than 1/10,000 of a % of the budget. Thus, cuts in this budget can be expected to result in significant difficulties.

During the interviews, it was clear that arts education continued to have a low priority relative to mathematics and language during the recession and after it. In part, this appeared to be due to the latter having stringent testing requirements which significantly affected evaluations for the schools and their administrators. It is far more common for administrators to be perceived to have a failing school from problems in mathematics and language arts than from problems in arts education where standardized testing plays no significant role in school evaluations. Administrators continued to feel that arts education was important but that it could not change in priority because of pressures to show strong scores on standardized tests.

The most striking change in the perception of school administrators who managed arts education in schools with a significant arts education mission was their belief that parents moved to a more positive view of the value of arts education during the recession. Administrators felt that parents were an important, new, and needed ally as they sought increases in arts education funding.

In particular, parents were especially interested in student performances, like dance and music, and the integration of visual arts, as in painting and drawing, within dance and music performances. This is consistent with evidence from a Harris Poll conducted in 2005 (Paige and Huckabee, 2005) that showed nine in ten parents of school-age children support arts education programs.

This type of study is important as it sheds light on the competing forces affecting arts education funding as seen by those who must ask for and allocate scarce arts education funds. Views of administrators are not readily available for many reasons including an understandable reluctance to speak about the issues. For this reason, this study provides data that is not always readily available.

While candid, the views of these administrators are not unexpected, inconsistent with the factual data on budgets, or overwhelmingly negative though all felt arts education was of low priority before, during and after the recession. The study shows that parents can play an important role in helping administrators gain more funding for arts education. Administrators in other parts of the nation may wish to consider the value of parents in their search for more arts education funds as they seek support in their search for more funding.

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