

HIGH-QUALITY ARTS EDUCATION FOR ALL: HOW ARTS ACCESS CAN IMPACT A CHILD'S WELL-BEING AND BUILD STRONGER COMMUNITIES

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INTRODUCTION

High-quality education is the gateway to future economic success, but odds are often stacked against students from the start. Only 40 percent of Metro Atlanta's students are reading on grade level by third grade. And children who have not developed basic literacy skills by the time they enter kindergarten are [three to four times more likely](#) to drop out in later years and experience long-term behavioral and mental health challenges.

The impact these challenges can have on children and families is harmful. The impact on communities and economies? Devastating. According to the [U.S. Department of Justice](#), more than 70 percent of people who are incarcerated can't read above a fourth-grade level.

Every child—no matter their background or ZIP code—should have the skills and support they need to succeed from kindergarten, to graduation, and beyond. We believe a rich and robust arts education can get us there.

Here's how.

WHAT WE'RE UP AGAINST

Georgia continues to see significant drops in literacy rates. Only 40 percent of Metro Atlanta's students are reading on grade level by third grade, which is the turning point when children go from learning to read to reading to learn. When children struggle to read, they face even bigger challenges in other subjects—like failing to understand their math problems and comprehend their history lessons. The [data](#) tells us that without intervention, they rarely catch up.

To compound the issue, our youth are facing an unprecedented mental health epidemic. More than ever, young people are experiencing feelings of sadness, hopelessness, and loneliness. This challenge is so great that the [U.S. Surgeon General issued an advisory in 2021](#), urging us all to turn our attention and recognize the role we play in supporting children and youth. Since the pandemic began, rates of psychological distress among young people have increased, most heavily affecting those who were already vulnerable, including youth with disabilities, racial and ethnic minorities, LGBTQ+ youth, and other marginalized communities. In 2023, the [U.S. Surgeon General issued another advisory](#), warning us of the epidemic of loneliness and isolation in our country.

But we know there is hope. The deep inter-connection between the arts, literacy, and brain health can be a lasting and critical solution to the issues our community is facing.

HOW WE CAN HELP

Access to meaningful arts education can change the course for rising generations. At the Woodruff Arts Center, home to the Alliance Theatre, Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, and High Museum of Art, we're ensuring the 197,000 young people (of which 53,191 attend Title I schools) we serve annually feel supported and connected—and can start each day ready to learn, grow, and create.

And it's all because of the life-changing transformative power of the arts, which extends far beyond entertainment. When kids are given the space and the chance to explore freely and to tell their story through plays, through music, through painting, they feel more hopeful and less alone. They feel more prepared to absorb new information, to focus, and to succeed in school.

The [neuroarts](#) is an emerging field that explores how the arts and aesthetic experiences can benefit the body, brain, and spirit. This body of work and research tells us that access to the arts can improve physical and mental health, prevent and manage diseases, grow a child's developing brain, and strengthen the workforce—further proving how the arts can help us build stronger, healthier communities.

In the coming sections, we outline the arts education programming that the Woodruff Arts Center has been offering for decades. By expanding access and scaling this existing programming across our state and nation, arts education can be a solution for the pressing issues facing our young people.

WORLD-CLASS THEATER EXPERIENCES FOR CHILDREN

We know that 90 percent of a child's brain develops by age five. From the moment they're born, [infants' brains constantly form connections](#) through a process called experience-dependent plasticity. This means that every interaction and conversation, including creative and artistic experiences, help activate specific neural pathways, strengthening those that are frequently engaged.

That's why it's imperative that our youngest learners experience the arts—right at the start.

The Alliance Theatre's Bernhardt Theatre for the Very Young provides professional performances for children (ages birth to five years old) and their grown-ups, giving them an artistic experience that overcomes age, developmental barriers, and language, while expanding their consciousness. These early experiences that nurture creative thinking help form those neural pathways, preparing the brain for future reading and success.

Additionally, the Alliance Theatre Institute uses Georgia Wolf Trap Early Learning Through the Arts, a nationally recognized research-based program, to provide early learning classrooms with all-inclusive arts integration tools using drama, dance, puppetry, and music to support students'

literacy, English Language Learning, and STEAM skills, along with high-quality teacher professional development. Twice recognized as an Arts Model by the U.S. Department of Education, [research proves](#) that participating students:

- Demonstrate higher levels of language development when compared to their peers (especially significant for English language learners and students in low-income households)
- Demonstrate greater improvement in grammar development than their peers
- Gain the equivalent of more than a month of additional learning
- Score significantly higher on standardized tests measuring initiative, language, logic, and other key skills

MUSIC EDUCATION

[Exposure to music](#) allows young brains to absorb notes, tones, and words they will later use, preparing their brains for learning and enhancing cognitive ability for a lifetime. Music builds neural pathways throughout the brain, but especially in the corpus callosum, a band of tissue that connects the two hemispheres of the brain. Neurologists believe these connections increase problem-solving ability and greater emotional resilience in young people.

The Atlanta Symphony Orchestra's Music for the Very Young classes, in partnership with [The Music Class](#), offer interactive research-based musical experiences at no cost to families. Classes are full of creative movement activities, and families can take the music home to facilitate meaningful repetition outside the classroom. This early and frequent exposure to music can set the learning and reading brain up for lifelong success.

And for young people facing anxiety and depression, listening to relaxing music can lower cortisol levels by nearly 60 percent, which helps maintain blood pressure, heart rate levels, and reduces anxiety and stress.

IN THE CLASSROOM AND BEYOND

Supporting teachers as they integrate arts education into their classrooms is simple and scalable. The High Museum of Art's virtual teacher resource library contains dozens of resources created by educators for educators. These resources are used by teachers of visual art, social studies, math, science, and other subjects. We also produce exhibition specific teacher resources for educators to prepare their students for a field trip to see an exhibition and then to explore its themes back in the classroom. These resources are free to download and include classroom-ready, high-resolution images, video libraries, thematic overviews, and detailed lesson plans.

The High also partners with the Georgia Department of Juvenile Justice to provide students with curriculum-based guided tours alongside art-making workshops. DJJ is in Georgia's 181st school district and serves the needs of Georgia's youth offenders up to age 21. This partnership program inspires incarcerated youth to explore their creative talents and promotes healing, artistic expression, and cultural awareness.

THE POWER OF FIELD TRIPS

In 2019, researchers from the [University of Arkansas' National Endowment for the Arts Research Lab](#) released two working papers showing that students who attend multiple arts-related field trips have higher levels of social-emotional skills, stronger school engagement, and higher standardized test scores. This study is the first in its field to capture causal effects by studying multiple field trips across art forms in a large urban city and including self-reported measures as well as administrative data. Those who attended six field trips over the course of two years showed even higher levels of conscientiousness, demonstrating a compounded effect of exposure to the arts. In summary, students who were randomly selected to attend the field trips were:

- Two times more likely to graduate college
- Three times more likely to win an award for school attendance
- Four times more likely to participate in math or science fairs
- Four times more likely to be recognized for academic achievement

These working papers are available for download here:

- [Altered Attitudes and Actions: Social-Emotional Effects of Multiple Arts Field Trips](#)
- [Does Art Make You Smart? A Longitudinal Experiment of the Effects of Multiple Arts-Focused Field Trips](#)

CONCLUSION

We know that every young person in our community deserves to grow, learn, and succeed. Every young person deserves the chance to contribute to their world in meaningful ways, to build and be a part of strong and healthy communities—communities where economic and creative opportunities abound. We believe those opportunities flourish when the arts, brain health, and literacy collide.

This means we believe in communities where every young person has access to a rich and robust arts education, so that they can explore big ideas and tell their story—so they can find connections and resilience and hope.

We believe we can get there. Together.