CRITICAL SUCCESS FACTORS
for Achieving District-Wide Arts Education

FACTOR: THE COMMUNITY

In districts with strong ARTS EDUCATION, the community — broadly defined as parents and families, artist, arts organizations, businesses, local civic and cultural leaders and institutions — is actively engaged in the arts politics and instructional programs of the district.

The community assists in the teaching and learning activities of the faculty and students, mobilizes and supports arts education through political activity, uses school facilities as community arts venues and provides venues for faculty and student works and performances.

Formal “partnerships” of school and community arts organizations providing arts education programs to students can be found in many of these districts, and the creation of those partnerships is a strategy a number of districts use. But the pattern of relationships in the strongest districts is more richly textured and involves a wide range of formal and informal interactions among school staff and the community. School administrators in these districts encourage or support an array of interactions described in the profiles, including:

- active parent and community involvement in school arts programs;
- interdisciplinary teams involving arts specialists in the development of curricula;
- arts faculty involvement in community arts events;
- artists residences;
- student exhibitions and performances for community audiences.

FACTOR: THE SCHOOL BOARD Typically, one or more influential members of the board have had personal experiences or education that developed their knowledge and valuing of the arts and use this background to:
• support the development of plans to strengthen arts education, then apportion resources in accordance with the plan.
• treat arts education equally with other subject areas when budget cuts are required;
• consider the artistic qualities of buildings and the needs of arts education programs during facility renovation and development.

**FACTOR: THE SUPERINTENDENT**

Superintendents who regularly articulate a vision for ARTS EDUCATION are critically important to its successful implementation and stability.

Superintendents interviewed for the study generally credit school staff, key board members, and /or influential community forces with assisting or convincing them to develop a vision for schooling that includes arts education. But the subsequent actions by the superintendent are vital to sustaining district-wide arts education.

Superintendents in these districts take such actions as:

• regularly articulating in writing, memos, and speeches the importance of the arts in achieving the goals of the school district;
• appointing highly effective district-wide arts coordinators;
• developing a shared understanding with their district arts coordinator(s) of the role of arts education and providing support for implementation;
• encouraging education staff to collaborate among disciplines to ensure district-wide initiatives apply to and include the arts;
• committing personal time to meeting with the arts education personnel of their district and to representatives from the arts and cultural organizations of the community.
FACTOR: CONTINUITY

Many districts examined in this study have board members, superintendents, and/or district arts coordinators who have served in their districts for a decade or more. Similarly, many building-level leaders have worked in the district of the same school for even longer periods. Stability in these formal leadership positions is important in pursuing a set of educational goals, while strong community traditions that embrace the arts are important factors in shaping a consensus supporting arts education.

School leaders told the researchers that consensus was a key to continuity. Superintendents and principals who enjoyed healthy relationships with the board and influential segments of the community had the freedom and time to pursue their educational visions. Demographic, political, or value shifts in the community produce board and leadership turnover, a major problem in sustaining arts education.

FACTOR: THE DISTRICT ARTS COORDINATOR

School board members and superintendents repeatedly affirm the essential role of the district arts coordinator(s) in sustaining strong arts education programs and in keeping “the arts” part of a district’s definition of education. Their first piece of advice to their colleagues in other districts is to hire an effective coordinator. They emphasized the care with which they searched for “the right person” – some tapping a recognized leader among the ranks of the arts teachers, others wooing an outstanding arts educator from another school district.

Smaller districts often lack resources for a full-time coordinator but add the responsibility to the workload of a district curriculum specialist or an arts
educator at a school. While the approach has problems – overwork and lack of clarity among them – it is essential in these districts as well. Effective coordinators play a number of crucial roles and provide several vital services:

- They are often the staff member most actively engaged with influential segments of the community that value the arts and are instrumental in nurturing and mobilizing community support for arts education.
- Board members credit arts coordinators with keeping "the arts on the table" during budget sessions.
- They negotiate between board and central office policies and school-level decision making, an increasingly critical role as districts move towards site-based management.
- They often participate with school-level decision making, an increasingly critical role as districts move towards site-based management.
- They often participate with school-level leadership in the screening and hiring of teachers.
- Teachers in turn cite the role of district coordinator in facilitating communication among individual schools and in fostering the climate of support for arts education in the community and district.

FACTOR: A CADRE OF PRINCIPALS

School principals who collectively support the policy of ARTS EDUCATION for all students often are instrumental in the policy’s successful district-wide implementation.

The study reaffirms research on the role of the principal as the primary instructional leader at the individual school level. Principals create the expectations and climate in the school building and their support for arts education is essential.

Many principals interviewed for the study spoke of early learning or involvement in the arts or of professional development opportunities that helped them to decide to support arts in their schools. Others were convinced by the effectiveness of arts education in addressing specific issues. For instance, principals looking to create a thematically focused or interdisciplinary approach in an elementary or middle school have found that art forms can play a central role because of their complex content and range of activities. Others have found that hard-to-reach students become actively engaged in the arts and, subsequently, in other aspects of the school. Similarly, parent and family involvement in arts education enhances the overall
environment for learning.

For a district as a whole to sustain the successful implementation of arts education for all of its students, a sufficient number of these building level leaders must personally value the arts or be persuaded by other pragmatic considerations to make them an important aspect of the school. In view of the national trend to site-based management, this factor is critical. Recognizing this, district-level leaders in several of the districts studied include arts education in the professional development activities of school principals.

**FACTOR: THE TEACHER AS ARTIST**

The presence of arts specialists in a district’s schools proved time and again to make the difference between successful comprehensive, sequential arts education and those programs in development. What the study found compelling is the vibrancy that teachers who practice their art bring to an already strong program.

Whatever their medium or metier, teachers who also pursue their artistic life repeatedly told researchers, for this study, that the value placed on the professional quality of their art by school administrators stimulates and refreshes their commitment both to their art and to teaching.

Administrators, in turn, pointed out that the best teachers stay actively engaged in their art form through exhibitions and performances in district and community venues. In the strongest districts, this commitment to the teacher as artist is reflected in recruitment and hiring practices that include auditions and portfolio reviews to assess that applicant’s competence in the art form. Experienced arts teachers in the district participate in these reviews.

**FACTOR: PARENT/PUBLIC RELATIONS**
In the districts profiled here, school leaders employ a variety of techniques to engage the total school community in arts activities that create a climate of support for arts education. Exhibition spaces and performance venues in the schools are made available to students, faculty, and community artists. Free tickets are provided to students, staff, and faculty for attendance at community arts events. One district provided free piano lessons to all district staff. Others create week-long festivals of the arts engaging the school and community organizations.

These activities are conceived as part of a general strategy to strengthen school-community ties in support of the district’s general educational goals as well as the arts education budget and programs. Principals told researchers that parents who never come to school for parent-teacher conferences will come to see their child perform, creating opportunities for building relationships important to the school and district.

FACTOR: AN ELEMENTARY FOUNDATION

Strong ARTS PROGRAMS in the elementary school years are the foundation for strong system-wide programs.

District leaders advise their colleagues to establish strong arts education in the elementary school years and to begin any rebuilding efforts at that level. They give several reasons for doing so. Elementary programs establish a foundation in the arts for all students, not just for those in specialized programs or those who choose an arts course of study in high school. Moreover, in some art forms such as instrumental music, a long period of time is needed for students to achieve even a basic level of proficiency. If such instruction is not begun in elementary grades, a district will not have quality programs at the secondary level.

The arts also have proved to be strong components in the adoption of an interdisciplinary curriculum by elementary schools. School leaders find, too, that beginning programs in the early years builds relationships with parents and community organizations important to sustaining their support for comprehensive arts education. These leaders advise their colleagues seeking
to reestablish strong arts programs to begin with a major focus on the elementary years.

**FACTOR: OPPORTUNITIES FOR HIGHER LEVELS OF ACHIEVEMENT**

School leaders in these districts provide specialized ARTS PROGRAMS as part of their broad strategy for securing and sustaining community support for the district’s overall educational goals.

**Districts** examined in this study offered a wide range of specialized programs for students of the arts, including magnet schools, Advanced Placement programs, and summer and weekend programs. These programs create an environment of excellence that challenges teachers to continue to develop proficiency in their art forms and encourages students to aspire to professional levels of performance. Students studying the arts in these specialized programs expressed to interviewers their intense pride in and commitment to their work. They compete for and win recognition in arts competitions at the local, state, and national levels. Their achievements contribute to community enthusiasm for the arts and a belief in the excellence and quality of the district’s educational system.

**FACTOR: NATIONAL, STATE, AND OTHER OUTSIDE FORCES**

Many districts in this study employ state or national policies and programs to advance ARTS EDUCATION.

**Policies, mandates, and funding** from the state or national levels will not of themselves forge the community/school consensus required for district-wide arts education. But committed leaders in districts examined in this study marshaled such forces to strengthen the consensus to support policies and programs in the schools. National and state standards for arts education, state education reform movements, federal funding for general school improvement or targeted programs or populations all were used to support and advance the arts education agenda in these districts. Similarly, support from private foundations has served to stimulate reform efforts in a number of the districts examined. System-wide implementation, however, required intense community involvement and consensus.

**The case studies** that follow in this report illustrate the specific ways in which consensus has been achieved and sustained in eight school districts. They also illustrate how these critical factors contribute to the conversion of consensus into programs and practices. The lessons from these districts offer practical guidance to school and community leaders in their parts of the country who are seeking ways to make arts education fundamental in their school and communities.
FACTOR: PLANNING

School Leaders in this study advise the adoption of a comprehensive vision and plan for ARTS EDUCATION, but recommend its incremental implementation.

Leaders at the district and building levels repeatedly told researchers that it was important to combine a compelling vision of the importance of arts education with a thoughtful implementation plan that showed how resources would be apportioned over time to reach all schools and students. The plan established confidence among art teachers and building-level administrators that resources eventually would be available but that the increases in district-wide support must necessarily be incremental.

Districts have developed a number of strategies for allocating new resources, many of them based on stimulating a “bottom up” request for arts education funding from school sites.

FACTOR: CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

School districts that succeed in advancing ARTS EDUCATION promote reflective practices at all levels of the schools to improve quality.

While researchers found few districts using student assessments in the arts as part of a formal accountability system, the strongest districts actively encourage the use of arts assessment techniques for improving student, teacher, and administrative performance. A few districts, for example, use portfolio review for evaluations of principals and teachers as well as students. Others encourage teachers to set themselves a challenge within their art form that will be addressed and assessed throughout the year – composing new music for a choral group, for instance. What researchers observed in these districts was the disposition to reflect on and improve practice that is central to improving artistic achievement.

CONCLUSION
Not every school district examined in this report exhibits these factors to the same degree. But the more intensively the factors occur, the stronger the presence of quality arts education in their schools. A level of agreement among formal and informal leadership in the community and school on the importance of arts education is essential. Implementing and sustaining that agreement requires a sufficient presence of the critical success factors to achieve a level of quality that keeps the consensus intact. The following profiles and case study reports show how this occurs in specific local contexts. The lessons of this report are best learned by analyzing these districts.