



From Schooling to Learning: Leveraging Community-Based Arts Education for Credit

Introduction

In 2012, EdVestors—a dynamic school change organization focused on accelerating substantive improvement in urban schools—led a partnership between Boston Public Schools (BPS) and community organizations to provide course credit to students participating in community-based learning experiences in the arts. This pilot project was designed to expand students’ access to and participation in arts education, a requirement for high school graduation. Such community learning experiences have been recognized nationally as a promising strategy for improving students’ engagement in school. “Real world” learning opportunities, which allow students to express choice, offer richness to learning and help foster engagement in important civic and cultural institutions. However, community partnerships are often limited in scope and rarely extend beyond a small network of schools. In contrast, the approach piloted by EdVestors as part of the larger multi-year effort to expand arts education throughout BPS tests the viability and sustainability of a broad-based approach to develop community learning options. In this brief, the Rennie Center for Education Research & Policy provides a review of the literature and documents critical knowledge gained from the BPS Arts Expansion Initiative efforts in this arena.

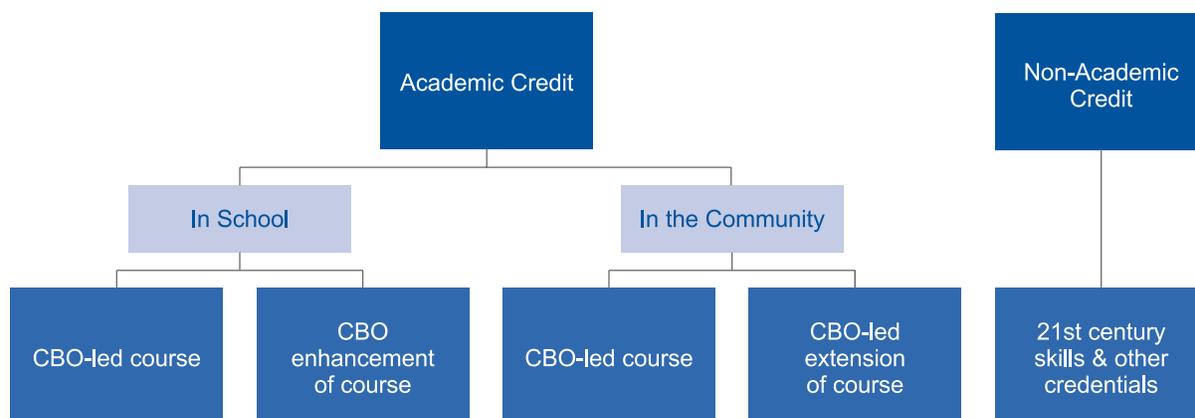
Overview

What is community-based learning? Community-based learning provides opportunities for students to build content knowledge and develop skills with external organizations working in collaboration with public schools. Properly implemented, community-based learning supports and advances local education options and offers applied learning in students’ areas of interest. Some districts view community-based learning as an effective strategy for exposing students to new experiences and diversifying skill building opportunities, while others are developing more rigorous programming as a way for students to earn credit and/or fulfill academic requirements. Working to establish community-based learning as a core component of students’ academic programming, Boston After School & Beyond^A has identified several possible credit-bearing options that may occur both within and outside of school:

Community-based learning: Design & purpose

- Expose students to meaningful content;
- Provide students with choice and voice;
- Connect learning to personal knowledge and experiences;
- Involve ongoing assessment of skills and feedback to students; and
- Build school–community partnerships around a common learning purpose.

Figure 1. Potential Community-based Credit-bearing Options in Boston Public Schools



^A Boston After School & Beyond (Boston Beyond) is a public-private partnership that seeks to ensure that every child in Boston has the opportunity to develop to his or her full potential. Boston Beyond mobilizes partnerships among program providers, philanthropy, business and higher education, and the City of Boston, especially the Boston Public Schools. In 2012, Boston Beyond and EdVestors partnered to launch efforts to facilitate more strategic connections between community organizations and the Boston Public Schools. These pilot projects were designed to expand students’ access to community resources as part of earning elective academic credit.

What are the benefits of community-based learning? Community-based learning can be a powerful education and youth development tool. Many community learning options engage students in hands-on learning that extends beyond the traditional school day. These experiences demonstrate relevance to students' lives, especially when students are given choice over options, and represent a promising approach to improving student outcomes.¹ Emerging research indicates students who participate in community-based learning increase acquisition and application of real-world problem-solving skills and knowledge,² and are more likely to actively engage in their learning with increased self-confidence.³ Other potential student outcomes include:⁴

- higher rates of school attendance and lower dropout rates;
- improved student attendance and academic achievement;
- decreased involvement in risky behaviors;
- stronger connections to adults and peers;
- enhanced awareness of cultural differences and attitudes towards others; and
- gains in career/communication/life skills and a positive increase in career exploration knowledge.

Community-based learning can expand the vision for schooling: new learning opportunities can be a powerful asset in making a curriculum more relevant and activating diverse learning styles among students not as engaged in traditional classroom environments.⁵ If students, schools, and community partners all co-exist in the same neighborhood, community-based learning can build social capital and give students the chance to ground their education in their daily, non-school experiences.⁶ Finally, and perhaps most important to the needs of at-risk students, community-based learning can expand students' circle of caring adults, often an important factor in decisions on (educational) persistence and advancement, and career selection.⁷

What structures help community learning flourish? Nationwide, many districts and schools partner with community-based organizations to extend academic learning opportunities (e.g., summer programs) and non-academic services (e.g., mental/physical health referrals). However, credit-based community learning options are distinct from more typical school-community offerings. Credit-based community learning is intentionally integrated into the district and/or school curriculum and intended to help students achieve specific learning goals. Successful examples establish clear and agreed upon goals and outcomes. Community partners, school staff, and district administrators routinely engage in meaningful conversations about the common curricular foci that will characterize the connection between classroom and community learning. Protocols and processes are used to define how schools and community organizations will work together and collaborate.

What are barriers to community learning? Extending learning beyond the schoolhouse door does not come without challenges. Research notes that successful implementation and sustainability of community-based learning depends on drawing upon all the resources available in the community.⁸ Common challenges highlighted in research, and at play in this pilot effort with Boston Public Schools, include operational issues concerning staffing and communication between partners, as well as concerns about sustainability. Neither schools nor community-based organizations typically have these partnerships as a main focus of their work and securing

Challenges & solutions in developing credit-bearing, community-based options in New York City

The After School Corporation (TASC), an intermediary organization working with the New York City Department of Education, community-based organizations (CBOs), and local funders in New York, has developed several approaches to offering students learning experiences that extend beyond the traditional school day. While advantageous to many schools, especially small high schools without a wide-range of electives, developing community-based options presents challenges. To make new learning opportunities sustainable, TASC:

- Recruited interested community partners (e.g., museums, arts organizations, and youth development corporations);
- Convened principals willing to consider credit-bearing community options;
- Developed online tools to catalog community-based options so that schools and CBOs could "find" each other;
- Identified certified, licensed teachers interested in community options, and co-developed a curriculum; and
- Established protocols for teachers and community partners to monitor student progress and develop student assessments that demonstrated skill acquisition.

In the spring of 2012, TASC worked with a studio arts organization to offer a 60-hour, hands-on tutorial to high school students as a one-credit arts elective. In expanding these opportunities, TASC worked with principals to highlight the work between teachers and community partners so that school leadership would have a nuanced perspective on how community-based offerings meet curricular requirements and are aligned to local content standards.

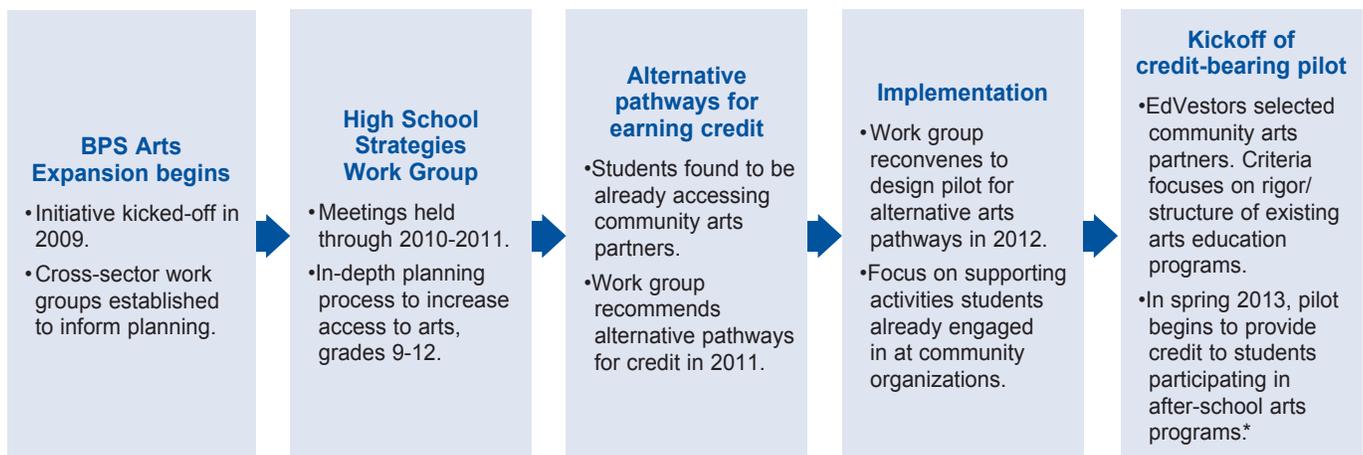
funding to support staff time to manage opportunities can be difficult to sustain for multiple years.⁹ Further, although community-based learning is defined by integration between learning at school and learning in the community, school leaders may remain wary; the rigor associated with community learning options and alignment with local content standards may be called into question. There is no one-size-fits-all model of how schools and community partners provide for credit-bearing community learning options. The Rennie Center for Education Research & Policy conducted a documentation project in collaboration with EdVestors to examine whether this district-wide arts credit-bearing pilot provides a new approach to support and sustain community learning options for credit.

High School credit-bearing arts pilot project

The high school credit-bearing arts pilot project is one strand of the larger Boston Public Schools (BPS) Arts Expansion Initiative, a multi-year effort to expand quality arts education equitably in schools across the district.¹⁰ The Initiative was envisioned in response to a specific need: a 2009 survey revealed only 67% of BPS K-8 students district-wide were getting arts education at least once a week, and only one quarter of high school students had access to any arts learning opportunities during the school day. Direct arts instruction opportunities were not systematically aligned or arranged through the district. To achieve a more coherent and sustainable approach to high-quality arts education, a public-private partnership was established to expand direct access to arts instruction, strengthen BPS central office capacity, and coordinate partnerships between schools and community organizations. BPS has worked closely with local foundations, arts organizations, higher education institutions, and the Mayor's Office to achieve its goals in arts education; EdVestors has served as the convener and managing partner for the Initiative.

To increase access to arts education, one effort focused on developing a strategy for expanding arts options for high school students. At the time of the Initiative's launch—despite a BPS graduation requirement that high school students earn at least one arts credit (see figure below)—only a minority of BPS high school students (26%) had access to any arts learning opportunities during the school day.^B It was not clear that all BPS high schools could offer a range of arts courses (e.g., new courses, expanding existing courses) to meet students' needs, thus the search for creative solutions began. In response, the High School Strategies Work Group, convened by EdVestors as one of several work groups across the BPS Arts Expansion Initiative, began designing a pilot project in which high school students could gain arts credit by participating in after-school, community-based arts courses. Using community-school partnerships as a new approach to increase access to arts education, EdVestors worked with BPS to identify, select, and recruit community arts organizations with youth/adolescent programming known to be of high-quality.

High School Credit-Bearing Pilot: A Timeline



*Note: Students received credit if arts content was not offered by their school. Credit could be earned for graduation if requirements were met.

Once community arts partners were identified for participation in the pilot, EdVestors tackled other challenges, such as building initial relationships between schools and community arts partners and ensuring students would earn district arts credits for community learning experiences. Working in close collaboration with the BPS Visual and Performing Arts Department, EdVestors also developed specific roles and responsibilities for district office leaders, school staff/teachers, and community arts partners, and met with all parties

B Based on data from 2009-10.

to clarify expectations. When rolled out for the spring 2013 semester, participating students who completed course requirements at one of four different community arts organizations received BPS arts credit, meeting the high school arts graduation requirement.

Research Findings

This Boston Public Schools (BPS) Arts Expansion Initiative represents a novel attempt to expand access to arts education by incorporating community learning options. To inform school and community leaders about the success and sustainability of this approach in Boston and beyond, the Rennie Center for Education Research & Policy conducted research examining the activities in this district-wide arts credit-bearing pilot and key lessons learned among partners in their work. To do so, the Center reviewed documents, conducted site visits and observations with community partners, interviewed key stakeholders, and attended partner meetings. Key research findings are provided below.

Broad-based partner investment and stakeholder support proved critical. The pilot project was the first attempt to create a formal, credit-bearing partnership between arts organizations and BPS high schools. As discussed above, the project had strong community and district support due to several years of collaborative planning, and BPS district leaders were involved in early implementation. The length of time devoted to planning this project allowed for a rigorous review of research literature and programs in other cities; roles and responsibilities of community partners, district leaders and teachers were articulated in advance of the roll-out of community-based offerings; and there was clear communication on project goals. The structure of the pilot leveraged existing community arts offerings and expanded on arts curricular options in high schools.

EdVestors' intermediary role fostered strong communication among pilot partners. As conveners of the BPS Arts Expansion Initiative High School Strategies Work Group, EdVestors was well positioned to serve as a central “hub” for this pilot. For example, EdVestors connected community arts partners with teachers in participating high schools who would then be responsible for awarding credit. The organization also worked with staff from schools where students were already participating in community arts programs to gain buy-in and build stronger support for community learning. As the pilot progressed, EdVestors continued to be a central source of information for partners and stakeholders and cultivated a strong relationship with BPS to support collaborative decision-making.

EdVestors engaged community organizations and BPS teachers and leaders in robust conversations about arts education. The pilot project was designed to engage students already enrolled in arts programs at community organizations, and not supplant course offerings at local schools. Community learning options were expected to align with district arts frameworks, but also establish stand-alone courses. Teachers challenged community partners to ensure the transferability of knowledge and skills to the school-based arts curriculum, while partners described the desire to provide students the opportunity to engage in the “creative process,” using new skills acquired onsite and through “real world” experiences. Striking a balance among competing influences required robust conversations between community partners and district and school personnel about program design and student outcomes. These conversations create a foundation for powerful dialogue addressing horizontal and vertical alignment of arts education, inclusive of traditional classroom and community learning options.

During the pilot, EdVestors worked with community arts organizations and high schools to develop partner relationships, even among organizations that had previously worked together. Students were provided a broad range of choices across the city when selecting among community arts options; participation in the program spans many neighborhoods. Among the successes of the pilot, work led and supported by EdVestors as the convener of the High School Strategies Work Group cultivated broad community support and established a shared understanding of desired outcomes. With much groundwork laid, the pilot program expanded in fall 2013 (see text box).

Program participation & growth

School Year 2012-2013

4 partner organizations
4 high schools
24 students

School Year 2013-2014

8 partner organizations
11 high schools
58 students

Considerations for school and community partners

In scaling up arts education opportunities for all BPS students, the Initiative has advanced a promising approach for building community learning experiences for high school students. Key lessons have emerged: 1) a committed partnership among district leadership, school leaders and teachers, and community partners is necessary to systematize and sustain community-based learning opportunities; and 2) an intermediary is often needed to play a leadership role in forging these partnerships.

District leadership appears crucial to systematically moving community-based credit-bearing programs forward. A high-level district administrator who devotes time to this work is able to centralize and standardize what kinds of learning experiences may be offered across all schools and community partners (see text box). This person can collaborate with the intermediary on mutually agreed-upon priorities so structures can be created to facilitate credit-bearing offerings in the community. Evidence from existing community learning programs suggests the importance of designating a school-community coordinator to specifically manage the relationships between students, schools, and community organizations. This person can provide leadership and cultivate resources, create shared professional development for school and community partners, and collaborate with school and district staff—and students—to implement and support programming.¹¹

Building infrastructure through collaboration

Communication between schools and community partners alone cannot develop and sustain community learning options. Systematic protocols and structures are needed to clarify partners' roles. For example, a comprehensive “menu” of community-based opportunities can be developed. This may include the topic/content area the student should expect to study in their community experience, including skills gained and any relevant academic milestones. This document can be developed by a coordinator, and can be updated through regular communication with the intermediary organization, schools, and community partners. Students and teachers can also use the menu as a “match document” ensuring that students are making choices about the kind of community opportunity they want, and teachers can direct learning based on student skill level and curricular requirements.

An intermediary organization can serve as a crucial link between the school district and community organizations.

By bringing together key stakeholders and potential participants in a community-based learning program, the intermediary will create space for shared conversation about student learning. Collaborative opportunities may occur throughout the year, with discussions focused on: understanding the connection between the school curriculum and community organizations' work; articulation of student needs and interests; strategies for engaging students in these credit-bearing opportunities; and common planning/problem-solving time. These conversations can build a shared language around the rich content of community programming¹² and offer community partners with less experience partnering with schools and classroom teachers a system of support. Ultimately, this type of engagement, fostered by an intermediary organization, offers a network of partnering opportunities.

Co-ownership and shared articulation of the school-community learning enterprise is key to effective implementation.

Organizations that participated in the pilot were already actively engaged in programming. However, building a portfolio of credit-bearing educational programs aligned with a school system's learning standards and curriculum frameworks hinges on all parties having a clear understanding of their role in the partnership down to responsibilities for operations and oversight, especially as new schools and partners join.¹³ Evidence from various approaches stipulates the importance of partner collaboration in developing and clarifying roles. This entails a number of specific steps:

- define the oversight role of school personnel (allowing for coordination of resources);
- remove barriers to data or information sharing between schools and community providers; and
- encourage cross-cutting professional development attended by both in-school and community educators.¹⁴

Structured in-person opportunities for engagement between schools and community partners can be an important vehicle to build relationships, ownership, and knowledge about roles and responsibilities, curriculum, and details about out-of-school credit-bearing opportunities.

Conclusion

Community-based learning, defined as a broad set of learning strategies that enable youth to learn in community settings outside of school, can be an asset to both schools and communities. In proposing a new approach to scaling access to arts education achieved through a network of school and community arts partnerships, the BPS Arts Expansion Initiative has provided an instructive example of a community learning strategy prime for replication in large urban districts—whether in the arts or other curricular areas.

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Endnotes

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About Edvestors & BPS Arts Expansion

EdVestors serves as a catalyst for change in urban schools by identifying and shaping the most effective improvement initiatives, partnering with donors to invest in these efforts, and supporting education project leaders with hands-on expertise. In addition to stimulating private philanthropic investment, EdVestors serves as the driving force behind multiple reform initiatives in urban schools in order to level the playing field of opportunity and achievement for Boston's students. Since its launch in 2002, EdVestors has raised and directed over \$16 million to strategic school improvement efforts, including the BPS Arts Expansion Initiative, a multi-year effort to expand arts education in schools across the district. BPS Arts Expansion is focused on a coherent, sustainable approach to quality arts education for all Boston Public School (BPS) students. A true public-private partnership, BPS Arts Expansion has brought together local foundations, the school district, arts organizations, higher education institutions and the Mayor's Office.

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About the Rennie Center

The Rennie Center for Education Research & Policy's mission is to improve public education through well-informed decision-making based on deep knowledge and evidence of effective policymaking and practice. As Massachusetts' preeminent voice in public education reform, we create open spaces for educators and policymakers to consider evidence, discuss cutting-edge issues, and develop new approaches to advance student learning and achievement. Through our staunch commitment to independent, non-partisan research and constructive conversations, we work to promote an education system that provides every child with the opportunity to be successful in school and in life.

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