How We Created Our Theory of Change

With support from:

About Arts Ed Collaborative

Background
Arts Education Collaborative (AEC) was established in 1998 to support quality arts education in southwestern Pennsylvania. To do that, we focus our work on educators in schools and arts organizations.

Learn more about AEC and our programs at www.artsedcollaborative.org.

Mission
We collaborate with educators to unlock the transformative power of the arts.

Vision
We envision a diverse network of educators in Southwestern Pennsylvania that immerses young people—regardless of appearance, ability, income, or ZIP Code—in powerful, personally relevant arts learning that transforms their sense of self, ability to share thoughts and feelings, and capacity to shape communities.

Values
Humanity matters: People need to be cared for before they can do their best work. Everyone we encounter in our work is worthy of being treated with respect and dignity.

The arts are essential: We sincerely believe in the arts as an indispensable part of the human experience.

Inclusivity strengthens collaboration: Everyone we work with knows something we don't—we can learn from one another. Collaboration must be equitable and change-oriented if we are to dismantle harmful structures and build a liberated future. The more we share power, the better the outcome for all.

Continual inquiry propels our work: We ask questions to further our understanding of what is and to help us figure out what might be.

Change is possible: We believe the current way of doing things can be improved or reimagined. Our work can make a difference, especially when we are willing to take creative risks.

Staff
Ilan Berkman, Manager of Communications and Social Media
Chris Duerr, Manager of Operations
Bradley Hill, Creative Learning Coordinator
Anqwenique Kinsel, Director of Programs
Matt Sikora, Director of Evaluation and Planning
Yael Silk, Executive Director

Organizational structure
Arts Ed Collaborative is fiscally sponsored Carnegie Museums of Pittsburgh and receives financial support from The Heinz Endowments, The Grable Foundation, and Pennsylvania Council on the Arts. Additionally, Arts Ed Collaborative seeks out other voices for strategic input. Members of the arts ed community review our programs, offer advice, and help guide our work forward.

The Story of AEC's Theory of Change

The Activating Arts Learning framework evolved out of previous efforts to revise AEC's mission, vision, and values. Working on these statements, we were constantly reminded how little detail could be communicated in just one or two sentences. Many important questions were left unanswered. What, for example, are the qualities of powerful and personally relevant arts learning? And exactly how can those experiences be transformative?

Developing the theory of change over a period of eighteen months allowed us time to engage in conversations among ourselves and with arts educators and teaching artists, school administrators and teachers, arts organization leaders, and young people who are involved in the arts. Together we explored the ideas in our mission, vision, and values in greater depth and further clarified our thinking. We worked backwards from the three broad impacts highlighted in our vision—transforming young people's sense of self, their ability to communicate thoughts and feelings, and their capacity to shape communities—unpacking what each of these outcomes means to us and what conditions need to be met to achieve them. The resulting theory of change can be thought of an expanded vision for a future reality steeped in AEC's values.

Contributors

AEC Staff
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AEC Advisory Board
Jamil Bey, Eric Crosby, Abbey B. Farkas, Temple Lovelace, Cari Maslow, Bille Rondinelli, Tim Smith, Shannah Tharp-Gilliam

Consultants
Celeta Hickman, IAsia Thomas, Nina Unitas

Designers
Alecia Dawn, Heather Klar, Jason McKoy

Funders
Mac Howison, D'Ann Swanson

Youth discussion groups
13 middle- and high-school-age students at Alumni Theatre Company and Center of Life

Professional discussion groups
Michael Amick, Jazmine Bailey, Nina Marie Barbuto, Randy Barlett, Randall Coleman, Hallie Donner, Kelsey Ford, Patricia Ford, Emily Gallagher, Parag Gohel, Diarra Imani, Sarah Jackson, Chantal Joseph, Laura Nickel, Erin Perry, Dan Pounds, Monica Stephenson, Leah Stevens, Sara Tamburro, Nina Unitas, Sam Utley, Eileen Viloria, Eddie Willson, Lindsay Woge

Development Timeline

AEC staff begin to revise the organization's mission, vision, and values by sharing stories about when they felt most energized by AEC's work and imagining what the future of arts learning in the region might look like if AEC is successful in achieving its mission	May 2019
Members of AEC's Steering Committee—a group which provided input into programmatic priorities and strategic planning—review several draft mission statements written by staff. Feedback shows ideas about collaboration and the transformative power of the arts resonate most with the group.	May 2019
With the Steering Committee's feedback in mind, staff write a new AEC mission statement: We collaborate with educators to unlock the transformative power of the arts.	June 2019
Staff identify five core values to guide AEC's work, including: the arts are essential, change is possible, and inclusivity strengthens collaboration.	July 2019
Staff host an open house for AEC's Advisory Committee—a group of representatives from key constituencies—and other guests to respond to draft versions of the mission, vison, and values. The group finds the proposed mission more compelling than the vision. One advisor writes, "What is the state of the world you've driving towards.... I feel like the vision should / could chart a course to the world as it should be."	August 2019
Staff produce several drafts of possible visions in response to comments from the open house, eventually settling on a vision that builds around the concepts of collaboration and transformation at the heart of AEC's new mission. The new vision statement reads: We envision a diverse network of educators in Southwestern Pennsylvania that immerses young people—regardless of appearance, ability, income, or zip code—in powerful, personally relevant arts learning that transforms their sense of self, ability to share thoughts and feelings, and capacity to shape communities.	September 2019

Development Timeline

Building on the emerging mission, vision, and values statements and additional ideas gathered from advisors, AEC staff start to develop a set of strategic directions to prioritize the organization's work over the next three years. The proposed list includes several actions centered around articulating foundational philosophies and principles behind AEC's work, such as communicating specific outcomes associated with arts learning and the conditions necessary for achieving them.	September 2019
AEC staff finalize the new mission, vision, values, and strategic directions. Strategic priorities for 2020 include developing and publishing a broad theory of change for AEC's entire project portfolio that clarifies how the organization's work with adults benefits youth.	January 2020
Staff start to develop the theory of change by unpacking the three broad areas of learning outcomes mentioned in AEC's vision: transforming young people's sense of self, their ability to communicate thoughts and feelings, and their capacity to shape communities. Staff list perceptions, beliefs, understandings, and skills related to each outcome and discuss their potential impact on young people's lives.	April 2020
Staff compare their list of arts learning outcomes with findings from arts education research and other external frameworks—such as the National Core Arts Standards, the Social Justice Standards, and the Pennsylvania Career Ready Skills—noting areas of alignment and grouping them into clusters.	May 2020
AEC staff discuss the essential elements of powerful and personally relevant arts learning experiences that are needed to support the kinds of outcomes for young people that were identified in the previous round of developing the theory of change.	June 2020
Staff review prominent pedagogical theories and frameworks—such as Creative Youth Development, Culturally Responsive Arts Education, Teaching for Artistic Behavior, and Trauma-informed Teaching and Learning—to identify areas of overlap and incorporate additional ideas into their list of instructional principles and practices that are central to meaningful arts teaching and learning.	July 2020

Development Timeline

Members of AEC's Advisory Board—which was restructured out of the Steering and Advisory committees earlier in the year—review the draft lists of outcomes and elements of arts learning. Advisory Board members and staff vote on which outcomes are most important for AEC to support as part of its work with educators, cutting the list in half from eighteen to nine outcome categories.	October 2020
Young Audiences awards a $10,000 grant for AEC to apply principles and practices of culturally responsive social-emotional learning to arts education. A portion of the funding is earmarked to bring on expert consultants to advise on the theory of change, set up opportunities for community representatives to offer feedback, and hire a graphic designer.	December 2020
Members of AEC's Advisory Board are invited to share their thoughts about which elements of arts teaching and learning are most important for supporting the priority outcomes for young people, as well as barriers and facilitators of engaging young people in powerful and personally relevant arts learning.	February 2021
Staff host four discussion groups with a total of twenty-four arts educators and teaching artists, school administrators and teachers, and arts organization leaders. Participants share their perspectives on key elements of powerful arts teaching and learning as well as factors that make providing these types of experiences easier or more difficult.	March 2021
Staff host two discussion groups with more than a dozen middle-school and high-school-age students who are participating in arts programs at Alumni Theater Company and Center of Life. The young people talk about past arts learning experiences that stand out to them, what made those experiences so memorable, what people—including themselves—did to make those experiences possible, and what kinds arts learning experiences they wish they could have in the future.	March 2021
Staff review responses from across the discussion groups looking for prominent themes. Analysis shows participants discussed at least twenty-five environmental factors that contribute to offering meaningful arts learning experiences for young people. Feedback about the essential elements of effective arts teaching and learning is positive, and staff decide to keep all twelve of the original categories in the theory of change.	April 2021

Development Timeline

Staff begin work with external consultants Celeta Hickman and Nina Unitas to refine and organize the list of environmental factors that support powerful arts learning experiences with added focus on culturally responsive social-emotional practices. Edits and additions more than double the number of environmental factors, which the team organizes according to seven stakeholder groups: schools, school districts, foundations, higher education, community members, arts organizations, and arts educators.	April 2021
Jason McKoy of McKoy Creative, Alecia Dawn, and Heather Klar begin the process of designing a visual representation of the theory of change, meeting with AEC staff to clarify its intended purpose and audience and explore ideas for its look and feel.	April 2021
External consultant Sister IAsia Thomas facilitates a guided discussion for AEC staff in which they reflect on the theory of change through the lens of cultural responsiveness and Afrocentric theories of education. The session sparks further thinking about how to share contextual information around how the theory of change was developed and how to layer additional resources around the document to facilitate engagement with key concepts in progressive depth.	June 2021
The final design of a poster-size version of the theory of change is complete and a limited number are printed.	October 2021
AEC staff begin to incorporate the theory of change into program facilitation, starting with a curriculum writing session with educators from Franklin Regional School District.	October 2021
Staff begin planning a section of the AEC website centered around the theory of change to provide context about how the document was developed, share supplemental information, connect with related resources, and amplify additional voices and perspectives.	November 2021