



Fostering Creativity, Community, and Joy in the Context of a Pandemic

**The San Francisco Arts Pods Initiative
Final Evaluation Report**

September 2021

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About this Report

This report was developed by Social Policy Research Associates (SPR) in September 2021 for the Walter and Elise Haas Fund, to support its efforts to uncover and highlight key learnings from the Arts Pods Initiative.

Acknowledgements

We are incredibly grateful to the funders, teaching artists, and youth development agency staff who took time to share their insights with us, despite the many demands on their time, and even in the midst of a global pandemic. We also want to acknowledge and thank the youth and parents who managed to respond to surveys despite all the stresses and upheaval associated with this current moment. We are inspired and deeply moved by the dedication, creativity, and resilience demonstrated by all who funded, drove, implemented, or participated in the Arts Pods Initiative. Thank you for the opportunity to bear witness to this work.

WALTER & ELISE HAAS FUND

Fostering Creativity, Community, and Joy During a Pandemic

Evaluation of the San Francisco Arts Pods Initiative

Our program is amazing. The staff are incredible, the activities are enriching and inspiring, the arts curriculum includes movement so my child gets exercise and works on centeredness, and without the opportunities to interact with peers and form friendships, my child would be in a very different (less healthy) place than she is. The program is curated with such thoughtfulness and joy. There is celebration, discovery, diversity, and respect. I can't say enough good things. We are INCREDIBLY lucky to have been a part of the program this year. It has helped not only our child but also all of us knowing she has somewhere safe and enriching to be.

- Parent of 5th grader at the Dance Mission Arts Pod

Introduction

In the summer of 2020, a small group of funders, nonprofit arts organizations, city representatives, and comprehensive youth development organizations met to propose the creation of arts pods for San Francisco youth who were isolated at home during the COVID-19 pandemic. At about the same time, San Francisco's Department of Children, Youth, and Their Families (DCYF), and the San Francisco Recreation and Parks Department (RPD), in partnership with other city departments and community-based organizations, were in the throes of planning for the implementation of the Community Hubs Initiative (CHI). The CHI was an ambitious effort aimed at mitigating learning loss and supporting the social emotional development of the city's most vulnerable youth during the COVID-19 pandemic.¹ Recognizing the potential for leveraging complementary strengths and maximizing resources, the arts pods' proponents joined forces with the CHI, and thus, Arts Learning Pods were incorporated into some of the hubs, with a few arts pods running independently of the CHI.

In February 2021, the Walter and Elise Haas Fund² contracted with Social Policy Research Associates (SPR) to conduct an evaluation of the Arts Learning Pods. SPR was already serving as DCYF's evaluator for the CHI, which enabled the evaluation team to leverage CHI data in service of the arts pods evaluation, when appropriate. This evaluation report begins with an overview of the evaluation design, including an articulation of its key focal areas, as well as the data sources that informed it. It then moves into a detailed description of the arts pods, including an overview of the implementation models and the students served by these pods, as well as a description of the strengths and challenges associated with the arts pods. This is followed by a section focused on outcomes associated with participation in the arts

¹ More information about the CHI can be found on the DCYF website: <https://www.dcyf.org/data-and-reports/2021/4/26/san-francisco-community-hubs-initiative-mid-year-synthesis>

² The Arts Learning Pods are supported by three grantmaking organizations: the Walter and Elise Haas Fund, the Clarence E. Heller Charitable Foundation, and the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation.

Pods, before closing with a section that highlights takeaways for those interested in replicating, sustaining, or building upon the successes and learnings that emerged from the arts pods effort.

What is a Community Hub?

Community hubs were designed to serve as safe and nurturing spaces where young people could go during the school day to get academic and emotional support, as well as enrichment opportunities from youth development professionals. The hubs were designed as an intervention aimed at supporting young people who were already facing significant barriers to academic achievement and their overall health and well-being, and who were thus most likely to be disproportionately impacted by the shelter-in-place order and to struggle in a distance learning environment. Given space, resource, staffing, and facility constraints, there were a limited number of slots in the CHIs. Students who were prioritized for eligibility included those who were experiencing homelessness, residents of public housing and HOPE SF, children in the foster care system, English Learners, and students from low-income families. CHI hubs were typically staffed with youth development professionals who helped ensure that students attended their online classes and kept up with their assignments, and who also provided enrichment programming and other activities focused on supporting students' physical and social emotional health. DCYF and city partners ensured that CHI hubs were equipped with the technology necessary to support students during distance learning (including laptops and Wi-Fi access), personal protective equipment (PPE), and janitorial services to ensure regular sanitization of hub equipment and spaces.

[More detailed information about the Community Hubs Initiative can be found in [SPR's Evaluation Report](#)]

Evaluation Design

SPR's evaluation of the Arts Learning Pods utilized a mixed-method design that leveraged data collection activities that were already part of the CHI evaluation, while incorporating additional activities to answer questions specific to the arts education elements in the hubs/pods. The overarching goals for this evaluation were to (1) describe the work being done in the arts learning pods, (2) surface outcomes connected to participation, and (3) share learnings and recommendations with education leaders and the arts education field. Ultimately, this evaluation was designed to tell the story of the role that arts education can play in the context of a pandemic, particularly for students who face the greatest barriers to academic achievement and social emotional well-being. It also focused on lifting up the ways in which arts educators have been influenced by their experiences with the Arts Learning Pods, as well as key learnings around the unique value that arts education affords to students generally and in a time of significant upheaval. In addition to sharing overarching themes and findings, this report also includes spotlights of arts pods that have a unique, noteworthy facet of their story.

Undergirding the effort to develop Arts Learning Pods was the belief that creative arts learning contributes to children's intellectual development and social emotional wellbeing. Recognizing the significant challenges that youth and their families were facing as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and the loss of in-person schooling, those working to develop the Arts Learning Pods hoped that the infusion of arts could help students who were grappling with stress and trauma, provide good work experiences for arts teachers, and benefit parents by giving their children a safe place to be during the day that offered new outlets and means of expression. To assess the extent to which these hopes were realized and understand how the arts pods facilitated progress toward these goals,³ the evaluation was designed to:

³ A detailed list of the specific evaluation questions that guided our inquiry is included in Appendix A.

- Provide a **full description of the arts pods**, including location, arts program offerings, implementation model, and students served, as well as the **challenges and successes** associated with implementation.
- Explore **student-level outcomes**, particularly the extent to which participation in arts pods supported academic engagement, social emotional well-being, and arts engagement and interest.
- Explore **arts educator-level outcomes** by examining the extent to which arts educators' experiences teaching these arts pods in the context of a pandemic affected their practices, their enjoyment of teaching, and their thoughts about the value of an arts education and their roles as artist educators.
- Explore **other outcomes and learnings** tied to the arts pods, for example the ways it may have supported family well-being, strengthened partnerships across organizations, or yielded important learnings for the field of education generally and arts education in particular.
- Provide **recommendations** to extend the successful practices and learnings from the arts pods into existing educational and youth development programming.

Data Sources

Data to inform this evaluation was collected between April and July 2021 and included a mix of quantitative and qualitative data. As noted previously, where appropriate, the evaluation pulled select data from the CHI evaluation for arts pods that were incorporated into a CHI hub. Data sources that informed this evaluation include: (1) administrative data, including attendance and participant demographics; (2) a youth survey administered to students in grades three and above; (3) a parent survey; (4) two focus groups with teaching artists; and (5) four sets of interviews with arts pods program staff. More detailed information about these data sources can be found in Appendix B.

The Arts Learning Pods

There were 10 arts pods sites funded through this initiative. Eight were part of the CHI Initiative, with two pods operating separately from the CHI.⁴ Implementation of the arts pods varied tremendously across sites, reflecting different levels of program management by arts pods grantees, arts foci, and dosages of arts curricula. In this section we describe key aspects of the pods, including the different program management models.

Arts Pods Models

With the exception of the architecture pod, described below under Model 4, all pods were part of a learning hub that provided distance learning supports in the morning and arts education in the afternoon and/or at different points during the day or, and at different points during the week. There were essentially four different models of program management:

- **Model 1: An arts organization or youth development agency managed all aspects of a learning hub, including distance learning supports and arts programming (two hubs).** In this model, an arts pods grantee hosted a community hub and was responsible for overseeing all programming,

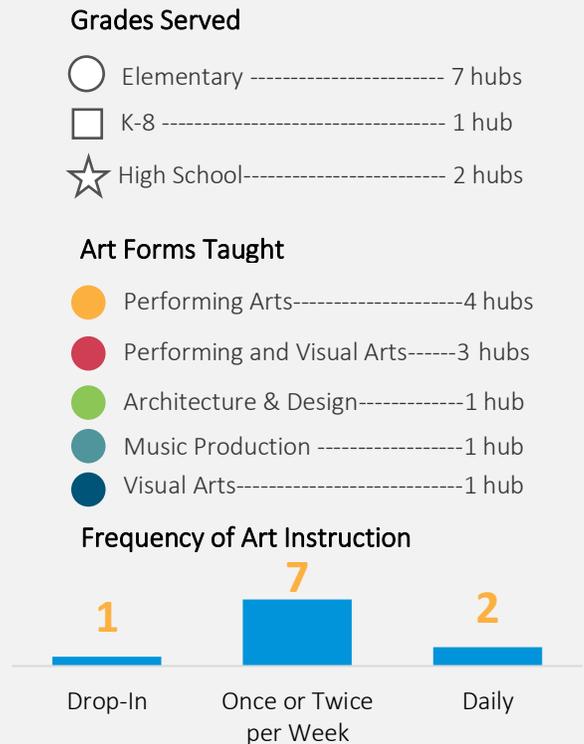
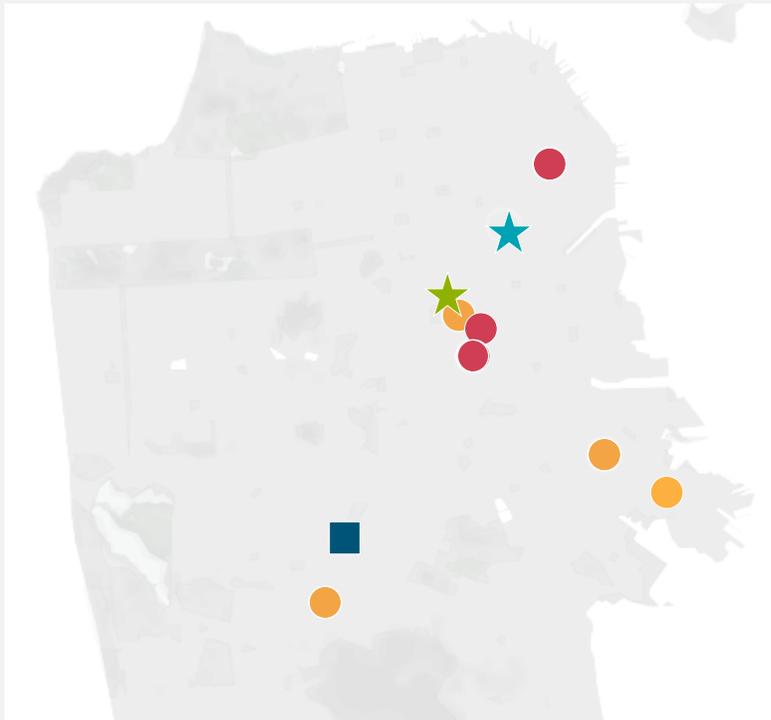
⁴ The arts pod at Dance Mission, managed by Dance Brigade, provided distance learning support and arts programming, but was not part of an official CHI hub. The arts pod at Columbia Park Boys & Girls Club, which was managed by Youth Art Exchange, took place on the grounds of a hub site (i.e., in its parking lot), but was not officially part of the hub.

including distance learning support and arts programming. Two sites fell under this model: Dance Mission and Success Centers.

- Model 2: Program management was shared through a partnership with a youth development agency and an arts organization (two hubs).** In this model, an arts pods grantee worked in partnership with a youth development agency overseeing a CHI hub to support distance learning, as needed, as well as to provide comprehensive arts programming to students. Two sites fell under this model: the Community Music Center (which partnered with Jamestown Community Center), and Yerba Buena Center for the Arts (which partnered with Mission Graduates).
- Model 3: An arts organization had no hub management responsibilities but dropped in to provide intensive, regular arts programming several times a week (five hubs).** In this model, an arts pods grantee provided arts programming for students within a hub at regular intervals (usually twice a week). Five sites fell under this model: 826 Valencia, Joseph Lee Rec Center, Geneva Powerhouse, Our Kids First, and Bayview Boys & Girls Club.
- Model 4: An arts organization worked with youth on specific arts projects and was not part of a hub (one hub).** There is only one pod that fell under this model—the architecture pod run by Youth Art Exchange (YAX). This pod was specifically for high school youth that worked on a design-build furniture project for the Excelsior neighborhood. The pod did not support distance learning and was not part of the CHI, though the program took place in the parking lot of a CHI site. (See spotlight on page 11 for more details about this program).

The arts pods also varied by the number of youth served (ranging from two to 111), the type of art forms taught, the frequency with which art lessons were provided, and the grades served. An overview of the arts pods, including a map of their location, is presented below.

Overview and Location of Arts Pod Hubs



The table below provides a snapshot of information about the arts pods, including the program site, organization providing arts programming, hub partner (where applicable), art forms being taught, dosage of arts programming, and the grades of students served through the arts pods.

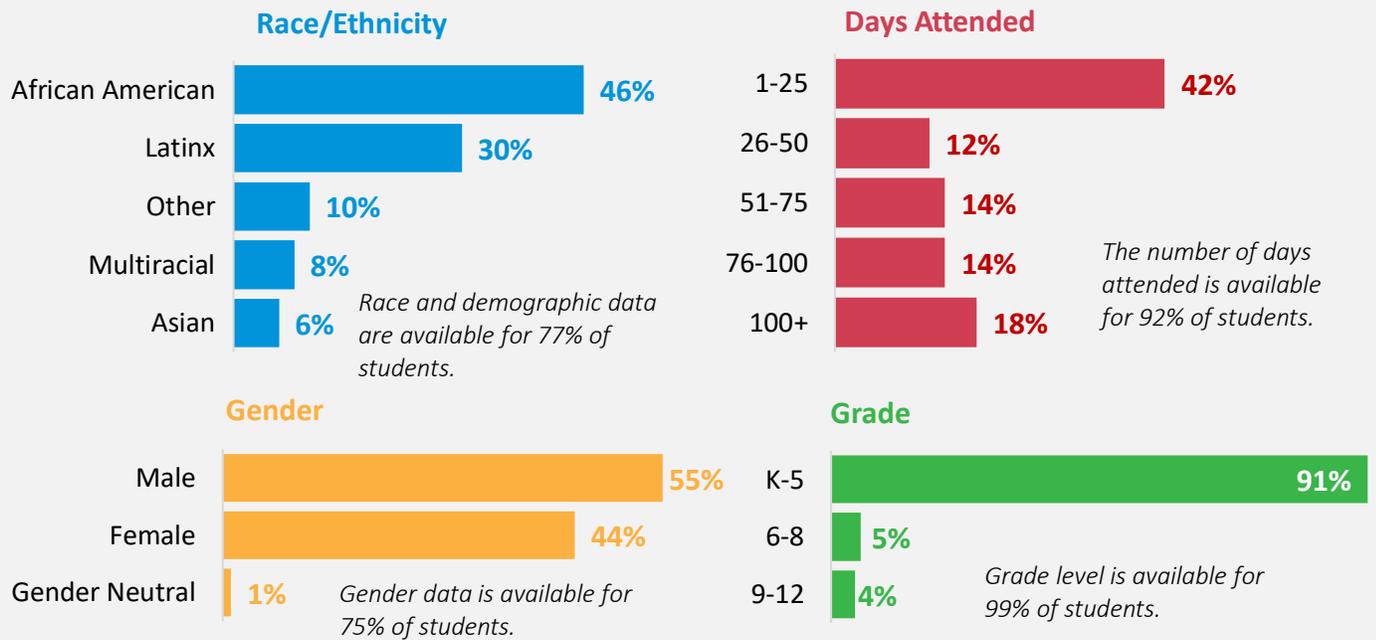
Arts Pods Program Information

Pod site	Arts program provider(s)	CHI Hub manager/partner	Art form(s)	Dosage	Grades served
Dance Mission	Dance Brigade	N/A	Dance, Taiko Drumming, Visual Arts	Daily (afternoons and during break periods)	2-6
Success Centers	Success Centers	Success Centers	Music Production	Drop in	High School
Community Music Center (CMC)	Community Music Center	Jamestown Community Center & CMC	Drumming, Dance/Movement, Digital Media	Daily	3-5
Yerba Buena Center for the Arts (YBCA)	YBCA	Mission Graduates	Theatre, Dance, Visual Arts	2 afternoons per week	K-5
826 Valencia	Community Music Center & Flyaway Productions	Jamestown Community Center	Music, Dance	2 afternoons per week	K-6
Joseph Lee Recreation Center	Zaccho	Joseph Lee Recreation Center	Dance	2 afternoons per week	K-6
Geneva Powerhouse	Jamestown Community Center and Youth Art Exchange	Jamestown Community Center & Mission YMCA	Visual Arts	2 afternoons per week	K-8
Our Kids First	Zaccho	Our Kids First	Dance	1-2 afternoons per week	K-6
Bayview Boys and Girls Club	Zaccho	Bayview Boys and Girls Club	Dance	2 afternoons per week	K-5
Columbia Park Boys & Girls Club	Youth Arts Exchange	N/A	Architecture & Design	2-3 afternoons per week	High School

Students Served by the Arts Pods

The pods served 265 students throughout the 2020-2021 school year. Students came from neighborhoods throughout San Francisco, with the most from Bayview/Hunter's Point (52%) and the Mission District (10%).⁵ Demographics of students are presented below. As shown, about 40 percent of students attended a pod for less than 26 days. Notably, the arts pod that served the most students opened late in the school year, and many students left the pod when school reopened. Among the other nine arts pods, only 14 percent of students attended for less than 26 days.

Overview of the 265 Students Served



Strengths

The arts pods were designed to serve as an arts-based intervention to support children and youth who faced significant barriers and thus were less likely to fare well academically, socially, and emotionally during the shelter-in-place period and in an online schooling environment. But the Arts Pods Initiative also served as an opportunity to leverage philanthropic dollars to provide arts education in a way that was more thoughtful and substantive than the drop-in arts education model that has become the norm in many public schools. While each art pod operated in its own unique way, common themes emerged about the strengths of the Arts Pods Initiative in general. These include:

⁵ SPR reviewed attendance and participant demographic data from DCYF's content management system (CMS) for arts pods that were contained within CHI sites funded by DCYF, from Recreation and Parks Department for the pods they operated, and from hub managers for the sites that did not function as part of CHI hubs. Because data was not collected in a uniform way across all of the sites, the amount of data available varies. Neighborhood data was available for 85% of youth participants.

- More time for meaningful engagement in arts education and with students.** Multiple teaching artists shared stories about teaching art in schools, wherein they would drop into a school and teach art “really fast” to multiple classes that were fairly large. As one teaching artist described, this model of arts education did not afford enough time to “dive into the practice of what I’m sharing and teaching,” nor to develop strong relationships with the students. Contrastingly, the arts pod model enabled teaching artists to teach small groups of students for longer periods of time and on a consistent basis, enabling students to have more choice, explore more and “really go deep into the arts,” and to simply have more meaningful engagement with the arts and with each other. To those ends, teaching artists shared that the arts pods gave them time to get to know students more deeply as individuals, which is necessary to help students succeed in general, but is especially critical for supporting youth in the context of a pandemic.

One of the things that I've noticed as a teaching artist going to other public schools throughout the year, pre-pandemic, has always been like this rushed curriculum that I had to spew out in like 40 minutes to three classes...I have about 20 to 30 kids in [each] class, and I have to just go through this curriculum really fast. And I don't have time to dive deep into the practice of what I'm sharing and teaching.

-Teaching Artist

Pre-pandemic, I was just all over the place, teaching at my tail end everything from like Pilates to being a teaching artist at the schools teaching fitness [classes]. I had all these jobs and it was just really challenging for me to be able to do my art and to be able to get at one location and really give my all to the students that I was working with. I just feel like for me, as an artist, [having appropriate pay] was just really helpful. So I want to let them know for sure they need to [keep doing] that.

-Teaching Artist

- Employment model that appropriately supports teaching artists.** There was a strong sentiment shared by multiple teaching artists that, in general, they were underpaid (and thus felt undervalued) for their work as arts educators. Several shared that they were forced to cobble work across schools and other “gigs” just to make ends meet. One goal of the Arts Pods Initiative was to shift this paradigm and ensure that the teaching artists’ teaching schedules were designed in such a way that they would not have to spread themselves thinly across multiple jobs in order to make ends meet, and that enabled them to focus on their students and on their craft. Additionally, the funders committed to ensuring higher pay rates for this work, especially considering the risks involved in teaching during the pandemic. Multiple artists shared how much it meant to be paid well, particularly given all of the challenges brought about by the pandemic, and that it helped them to feel respected as artists and teachers.

- Strong partnerships to effectively leverage strengths and resources.** Partnering with the CHI enabled youth development organizations and arts organizations to maximize resources while staying focused on the strengths that they each could bring to the effort. For youth development agencies managing the hubs, this meant that they had access to strong enrichment programming and more caring adults on whom students could lean for support. For the arts pods, it meant that the arts staff could focus on the work of providing quality arts education, since the hubs were taking care of logistics issues (e.g., having appropriate space, technology, meals, PPE, and janitorial supports). Respondents from our interviews and focus groups shared that these partnerships enabled them all to work better together, in service to their students and their community.

They [the youth development organization] were held responsible for following all of the COVID protocols, which they did an excellent job on. We had to meet daily on those kinds of things, check in all of that. And they were just wonderful to work with. I think that for us moving forward, having those relationships with those after-school providers only strengthens the relationships that we have in the neighborhood and subsequently being able to support the students. I think it's going to give us more flexibility and opportunity to explore different ways of supporting them.

-Teaching Artist

CMC and Jamestown: A Successful Strategic Partnership

The Community Music Center (CMC) and Jamestown Community Center (Jamestown) Hub was made possible by a collaboration between two organizations that have extensive experience with the Mission District community and youth in San Francisco. CMC is an arts education and performance center that aims to make music accessible to all individuals, while Jamestown is a community-based organization that provides transformative youth development services to support youth and families in San Francisco. For their arts programming, the CMC and Jamestown Hub provided percussion, visual arts, dancing, and singing. Further, a dance organization, Flyaway Productions, enhanced the dance offerings at the CMC and Jamestown Hub. This spotlight highlights the ways in which two community-based organizations with different programming and expertise can strategically partner and grow together to provide arts education and academic support for youth in San Francisco during and after a crisis.

When the CHI was announced in summer 2020, numerous community-based organizations in San Francisco, including Jamestown, submitted their proposals to manage hubs. Realizing that CMC serves the same community and has the same goal of bolstering youth development for those young people who faced the most challenges during the pandemic, the executive directors of both organizations decided to partner and manage a hub together.

It felt right. This is someone I want to partner with. They are hearing me, they are listening. They want the same goals I want for our kids, families, team, and community. – Arts Pod Staff

As Jamestown was experienced running multiple sites for long hours, they realized a critical need for additional staff support at hub sites. Similarly, CMC's teaching artists needed further support to take on both arts teaching and distance learning supervision. Thus, joining forces allowed both CMC and Jamestown to produce a full-day program in ways they would not have otherwise been able to alone. Additionally, both organizations' expertise and programming seemed to go perfectly hand-in-hand in terms of the skills needed for managing an arts pod and hub site – Jamestown has significant experience with youth development and culturally responsive arts programming, while CMC has expertise in not only music and performing arts, but also has a building of appropriate size and an open-air courtyard in the Mission District community where the hub was located. The two organizations ultimately engaged in program partnership across two sites: the CMC facility and 826 Valencia.

Though historically both organizations have partnered with a vast number of other organizations, this was CMC's first time partnering directly with a youth development-focused organization and, while Jamestown manages its own after-school arts program, Loco Bloco, this was its first time managing and planning a program with another afterschool arts program. Through daily, intensive brainstorming sessions, the leadership of both organizations successfully created a partnership that delineated respective roles, communication systems, and logistic procedures. The partnership also strategically leveraged both organizations' expertise – CMC managed all the arts-related resources, including the music spaces, instruments, and the teaching artists, while Jamestown managed the daily distance learning logistics and the youth development staff who provided critical supports to address students' pressing academic and social needs.

Working in partnership with an experienced youth development organization like Jamestown gave us a new perspective on the way we created our programming for the arts pods, and how we will create programming for our students and families going forward. It was an invaluable learning experience for us! – Arts Pod Staff

I'm so glad we did this, had it failed we would have still been successful because we tried, and tried for all the right reasons. If it didn't work, it didn't work, but I'm super happy it did. Kids are happy! – Arts Pod Staff

The CMC and Jamestown teams worked consistently together to plan student schedules, activities, and means to adhere to public health guidelines. This strategically planned partnership enabled the organizations to manage a safe, organized hub that could effectively support distance learning and provide a wide range of arts offerings, including percussion, Latin percussion, visual media, dancing, and singing. The partnership also enabled both organizations to seize a unique opportunity to integrate the arts offerings and youth development together – for example, Jamestown supported CMC teaching artists by using a social emotional learning and development framework for their teaching. By the end of the initiative, both organizations gained an immense amount of knowledge around youth development programming, especially for students who had particularly challenging experiences during the pandemic – they learned how infusing the arts with youth development activities is key to bolstering students' growth and well-being.

One of the kids ran in saying, "Oh my gosh, I'm so sorry. I'm so late." She wasn't late at all! She was excited to be there, but she was the last one to arrive that day. There was so much excitement, emotions that kids had a place to go... they were together and having fun. They wanted to be there. They felt safe and couldn't wait to begin their day. I don't know how they felt about leaving, but I'm sure they felt like, man, I can't wait to come back tomorrow! – Arts Pod Staff

The Jamestown/CMC Hub and arts pods provided students in the Mission District a safe space to learn, socialize, and grow in different art forms during the pandemic. Furthermore, it was such a fruitful partnership that the organizations plan to continue working together even beyond the sunset of the CHI and Arts Pods Initiatives. Referring to this work as "a radical expression of love," they shared how they "have a whole dream...where it's a Jamestown-CMC site for really robust arts and rich afterschool activities that's totally tuition-free that [will] run three or five days a week." Leaders of both organizations underscored how working with one another gave each a fresh and critical perspective on creating programs for youth – especially programs centering the arts as a means for their development.

Challenges

While there were many strengths associated with the Arts Pods Initiative, it was not without its challenges. Most challenges were directly tied to the difficulties of teaching in the COVID-19 context and within the hub structure. These include:

- **Providing engaging arts curricula that was appropriate for a wide range of ages within a pod.** Hubs that served elementary school students covered the full grade range in those schools, from kindergarten to fifth grade (and sometimes sixth). While some hubs that were hosting arts pods were able to divide arts pods into “younger” (kindergarten through 2nd grade) and “older” students (3rd through 6th grade), this was not possible for others. Teaching artists in these pods shared that they had to frequently adjust their curriculum in order to find activities that were feasible and engaging for very young children as well as the older students. While this was not always easy, many teachers shared that they worked hard to “find the balance” and developed multiple back-up plans so they could adjust quickly.
- **Supporting students with vastly different schedules.** Because students in the arts pods (and hubs generally) came from different schools and were in different grades, their schedules varied tremendously across individual students. As a result, supporting students with distance learning was incredibly labor intensive, as it required understanding the unique schedule of each student. Moreover, staff shared that students’ schedules seemed to shift periodically, which made it even more difficult to support them. Program staff often found themselves having to reach out to teachers or parents if there were problems with the schedule or if the student was experiencing technical difficulties accessing their online classes. Several teaching artists noted that they were not prepared for the number of “breaks” students were given, often at different times, so they often found themselves in the position of needing to occupy a single student who happened to have a long break while others were in class.
- **Holding programs in facilities that did not quite align with needs.** While arts pods organizations were grateful to have facilities that could host their programs, they were not always ideal. The architecture pod, for example, took place in a parking lot of a Boys & Girls Club because the program was not able to safely host the pod indoors, in a proper woodworking studio. Access to things like tools or electricity was not convenient, and the pod was subject to the elements and therefore had to change times according to seasonal light patterns, or temporarily close when air quality was bad during wildfire season. At least three respondents talked about the challenge of not having enough space to accommodate the needs of the students; for example, one shared that it would have been helpful to have a separate room for students who were on “breaks” so that they could more freely engage in other activities without disturbing students who were still in their online classes. Another respondent shared how difficult it was for some of the young children in his pod to be confined to a single space and to not have a playground in which to run around.

One challenge I can say that was real was balancing the needs of the kids who were in all different classes, all different grade levels, different schedules, and different learning needs. It was sort of a one-room schoolhouse environment with obviously trained youth development staff, but not trained educators, right? I think that, given the culmination of those factors, I think we managed it and the team managed it as well as it possibly could be. And that's the great determination that this team had to just make it work.

-Teaching Artist

I do think that that was a challenge, having this one room essentially to manage kids who needed to have breakout sessions or meet with their counselors or have a special meeting about issues that were going on. Those are all things that would happen on a regular basis. So that was definitely one challenge that I think we observed and did our best to work around.

-Teaching Artist

- Teaching effectively and safely.** Perhaps unsurprisingly, the teaching artists found it at times challenging to teach effectively while adhering to public health safety protocols. Several noted that it was difficult generally to keep track of and follow the safety rules and guidelines, and that they were “just stressed out all the time” trying to make sure they were doing things correctly. Others shared how following safety guidelines posed interesting challenges in the teaching of specific art forms. One teacher shared that “there’s so much information communicated with kids by your facial expressions,” so this made teaching art forms like theatre somewhat challenging. This same teaching artist also realized that she would need to constantly sanitize the props she used for her theatre classes, which was another unanticipated factor to fold into her work. Another teaching artist, who was a vocal instructor, had to completely shift plans and focus on teaching percussion, since group singing could not be done safely in the COVID-19 context.
- Providing adequate social emotional supports.** A number of respondents noted that, while they enjoyed being able to connect more deeply with students in the arts pods, one of the biggest challenges was meeting all of their social and emotional needs. One respondent noted that it was “the hardest part to manage, for sure.” They added that this was especially difficult within the extremely stressful context of the pandemic, and because teaching artists are not social workers, nor were they trained in classroom management.

I'm mainly a singing teacher – I've had a children's choir for the last 20 years. But we ended up doing some body percussion [instead] and we brought in a bunch of instruments. We had a little percussion orchestra, is what we ended up doing. So, it was interesting because we couldn't sing. Singing quickly became the most dangerous activity one could do during the pandemic. It's my specialty, but actually it was really great to have to pivot and do something a little bit different.

-Teaching Artist

I also think another challenge was just every member of the team trying to meet the social emotional needs of these kids. I mean, it was an unprecedented time and difficult time in the absolute best circumstance that you could have. And we know that we had these students, who are not coming from the absolute best circumstances. So trying to be a place where if you got frustrated and you got mad and you yelled at somebody, that we could hold you there and help you. I think, that classroom management, especially in these conditions, was hard for folks who do not do classroom management for a living.

-Teaching Artist

Youth Art Exchange: Using an Unconventional Space for an Architecture Pod

Youth Art Exchange (YAX) is an arts center in San Francisco that aims to provide in-depth arts education to amplify youth voices and pave a path for their leadership. YAX is one of the only arts organizations in San Francisco that engages high school students in design-build projects, not only by teaching them the processes of design, but also by having them lead their own design and building projects that are showcased to the greater public as a part of the urban fabric. YAX holds its design-build programming within their Youth Architecture Firm, which shifted into the Architecture Arts Pod during the virtual school year. All participants were high school students. This spotlight highlights how, despite facing numerous obstacles, YAX's Architecture Pod quickly formed and pivoted to using a parking lot as their workshop space so that students could complete design-build projects that they started before the pandemic.

In 2020, students at YAX's Youth Architecture Firm had been working on the Excelsior Pilot Street Furniture project – a unique project in which youth had been given the opportunity to lead, design, and build their own street and sidewalk installations in San Francisco's Excelsior neighborhood. In March 2020, COVID-19's spread led San Francisco to adopt public health guidelines to protect residents. These restrictions directly affected YAX's programming, including the Youth Architecture Firm. Students were deep into the design phase of this project and wanted to complete it. Other YAX classes could be taught online successfully, but constructing the street furniture required in-person workshops. Some parents were willing to continue if health guidelines were followed, so YAX leadership devised a creative, yet safe means to have students complete their installations during the pandemic. YAX's Youth Architecture Firm became an arts pod.

While planning this new direction for the Architecture Pod, YAX had to creatively circumvent multiple challenges, the largest one being losing access to their primary studio space for students' design-build work. As social distancing guidelines constrained YAX staff from securing any indoor working space, YAX and the architecture teaching artist had to quickly pivot to find an outdoor working space. Interestingly, the only workspace they were able to find was another organization's parking lot. Despite of its shortcomings, this parking lot ultimately transformed into a makeshift workshop space for students to complete their designs and construct their work. Each workshop day, the staff and teaching artist set up and then broke down and stored all workstations, power tools, and design materials in this parking lot.

You're not in an ideal workspace where you have everything set up, having to make things together, piece things together like, "Oh, we don't have that tool here. Well, let's find another way to do this because we're not in a wood shop. We're on the street." So, [it required] a lot of that sort of, again, nimble, flexible, let's-find-a-way type of thinking on the spot. – Arts Pod Staff

As the Architecture Pod began operating in this outdoor working space, YAX staff and teaching artists faced multiple obstacles. Architecture is an art form that is best suited to an indoor studio. Design build projects require power, electric tools, and construction materials that generally need protection from dampness, wind, and other elements. YAX staff dealt with the electrical power issues and engaged in constant troubleshooting around materials (or lack thereof) that posed obstacles to student progress. Further, outdoor conditions, unpredictable weather changes, unhealthy air quality due to wildfires, and even timing changes with Daylight Savings created ongoing hurdles for students and staff.

Despite these hefty challenges, the Architecture Pod staff and students triumphed by completing their street and sidewalk installations. Their attractive, lighted seating near the busy intersection of Geneva Avenue and Mission Street was dedicated by the district supervisor and other local officials at a ribbon-cutting ceremony on April 8, 2021. As of the writing of this report, the students and staff have been invited to build and install at least two additional, related structures in the neighborhood.

The benefits of completing the project through the pod were especially evident in students' growth in confidence and leadership skills as they connected with the community and saw their artwork come to life. YAX staff and parents also expressed that not only did showcasing their work to the community and greater public contribute to students' pride and confidence in their artistic abilities, but it also showed the community and greater public that high school students are able to create high-quality art that benefits the community. Some students even found themselves so invested in architecture that they felt the program "helped [them] find passion and enthusiasm for architecture design and helped build up [their] role in society by doing a meaningful activity for serving the community."

Overall, YAX's decision to rebuild their architecture firm into an arts pod proved to be transformative and impactful for the staff, the teaching artists, the students, and the Excelsior community at large – all despite working from a parking lot.

I think the second most important thing is the showcasing of [the art] to a bigger audience. I think it's twofold in terms of, it's not just a huge benefit to a young person in terms of feeling proud and feeling confident and gaining confidence from that experience of having your work on display. But it also, I think, convinces the greater community that young artists... are very capable of doing high quality work in all kinds of different disciplines, and that their voice matters and that they should be taken seriously, and their work should be valued just as much. – Arts Pod Staff

Outcomes

*The program has been an incredible support and resource for our family. With two working parents, we have struggled to monitor and engage our eldest child in her distance learning. The program has provided **structure, a place to learn, social interaction, incredible arts activities, and supported positive social skills and development.** My daughter's self-confidence and emotional state has improved since she joined and **she looks forward to attending every day.***

– Parent of 2nd grader at Dance Mission

This section of the report focuses on the outcomes associated with participation in the arts pods. While the evaluation was primarily focused on examining outcomes for student participants and teaching artists, this report also includes other outcomes that emerged over the course of the evaluation.

Student Outcomes

As noted above, the arts pods were designed to support social emotional well-being and academic growth. In this section, we highlight student outcomes related to engagement, emotional and physical well-being, social emotional skills, confidence and empowerment, and academic growth. As a result of attending an arts pod, students were able to:

- **Actively engage in arts learning and enrichment.** While educators across the county lamented the disconnection their students exhibited during distance learning, the art pod leaders celebrated the active engagement and joy they witnessed among their participants. Leaders described students running into class as quickly as they could for dance every morning, fifth graders clamoring for opportunities to engage in public speaking, and children fully engrossed in craft projects. As one teaching artist explained, “Art can be a full body experience... mind, body and soul. It's why they're so excited to hit the drum as hard as they can or put on a costume or whatever it is. It gets them excited to do it again and again and again.” Another teaching artist noticed a meaningful change in the talkativeness of students and their willingness to engage with each other over the time that they spent in the hub. Notably, at the three pods that administered the youth survey, 86 percent of youth who completed the survey reported that they had more fun since participating in their art pod, 95 percent reported that they had the opportunity to try something new in the arts, and 82 percent reported that they enjoyed the hub experience more because of the arts integration. Of the 31 parents/caregivers that responded to the parent survey, 100 percent agreed that their child learned about a new art form or new things about an art form with which they were already familiar at the program.

My son loves going to his program and every time I go pick him up, he always states that he wishes he could stay forever.

– Parent of 1st grader at YMCA/Jamestown Comm Center - Geneva Car Barn

This program helped my kid find his passion and enthusiasm for architecture design and helped build up his role in society by doing meaningful activity for serving the community.

– Parent of 9th grader at Youth Art Exchange

86% of youth survey respondents had **more fun** since participating in their hub

95% had the opportunity to **try something new** in the arts

82% enjoyed the hub experience more because of the arts integration



In addition, 93 percent agreed that being able to participate in arts activities was an important part of their child's hub experience.⁶

- **Spend time in community.** When the arts pods opened, students had been isolated at home for six months. Leaders reported hearing from their students that they experienced mental health challenges as a result of the extended time in isolation. Attending an arts pod brought opportunities to re-engage with their peers and build new friendships. One leader noted, "They came in very closed and shutdown, [after] they started to hang out with peers and build friends, it was like night and day." Another witnessed "a significant change in their talkativeness and their willingness to engage with each other and laugh and do what kids do" when youth engaged in the pod. In many cases, the pods took on the feel of a family, in a way that teaching artists had never experienced working with afterschool programs in the past.

I think the youth were really hungry for connection, that the connections that they made during this pod were even more special, just because it was just such an intense time.

-Teaching Artist

- **Enjoy movement and physical activity.** Additionally, the opportunity to move throughout the day was integral to enhancing students' well-being. Instead of sitting in front of the screen all day, they could "weave in and out of moving and working." One leader explained how they asked their students at the end of the day to describe how they felt about the day, and students almost always spoke about their ability to dance, to be outside, to move their bodies. In fact, 86 percent of student survey respondents reported that they got more physical activity since coming to their hub.

86% of youth survey respondents got more physical activity since coming to their hub.



- **Participate in therapeutic and emotionally soothing arts activities.** Teaching artists agreed that the very act of creating art is therapeutic, and their deeper integration with their groups of students allowed them to read the room and adapt their lesson plans to the energy of the group. One artist noted that she paid attention to the needs of the students on a given day and identified how she could creatively meet that need through art. Another shared that "everything we do here, like a picture that they take of a nice day, helps them reminisce or takes them away from the mind state that they're in, is therapeutic and can be emotionally soothing for most of our students." Notably, at the three pods that administered the youth survey, 82 percent of youth reported that they felt happier since they started participating in the hub. Similarly, 90

Kids love to scream, shout, yell, dance, jump, swing, and sing, but if they're in a room or a home with predominantly adults all day, there isn't a space for them to express [themselves] in this natural and organic way. When they're in a space [where they are free to] express with their bodies, not just with their words or their experiences, they get to feel where they are in the space... There's this freedom where they are able to express themselves in that natural way.

- Teaching Artist

82% of youth survey respondents reported that they **feel happier** since they started participating in the hub.

90% of parent survey respondents agreed that their child is **doing better emotionally** because of the program.



⁶ Twenty-two youth from the three arts pods where the arts organizations played the most significant role in hub programming (Mission YMCA/Jamestown Community Center/Youth Art Exchange, Dance Brigade, and Columbia Park Boys and Girls Club/Youth Art Exchange) completed the youth survey. Because the youth that completed the survey spent more of their time at the hub engaged in arts than students from other art pods, these results may not be representative of the experience of all arts pods experiences.

percent of parents and caregivers agreed that their child is doing better emotionally because of the program.

- **Engage in self-reflection and social emotional awareness.** Moreover, the arts-based activities gave students diverse outlets for self-expression and opportunities to process emotions. In addition to relying on check-in questions and one-on-one conversations, teaching artists intentionally created activities that involved self-reflection. Whether it be through movement, creative writing, or design, students translated their experiences or anxieties into their art and their making, leading to greater social emotional awareness as demonstrated by the words of a teaching artist below:

[The art] allows an opportunity for them to become emotionally aware of themselves. There's so much that happens through the art...there's a lot of meaning to it. So it allows them to dig and think a little bit differently, and tap into what they're thinking about and what their insides are telling them.

- **Have space and support to work through their feelings.** One leader explained how the arts pods gave students the space and time to build both their artistic skills and their emotional regulation skills. Unlike traditional class environments, the hub model provided the space to work more closely with students who may display behavioral challenges in other environments to help them understand their emotions. As one teaching artist explained, the pods provide “learning space where students have opportunities to [create things on their own and at their own pace]. And so they don't get too frustrated, which may lead to acting up in class and getting kicked out of class... that whole downward spiral of punishment for failing rather than learning from failure.”
- **Build confidence.** Along with the joy and social emotional awareness that leaders believe students gained through the arts pods, leaders also saw their confidence and sense of empowerment bloom. As one leader articulated, “I've seen my small group of students grow a whole lot from not trusting to trusting, from not believing in self to believing in self, to leading and engaging and doing.” Several leaders shared stories of students who “came out of their shell” while participating in the hubs, expressing their opinions more and taking leadership roles in group projects. For example, teaching artists at Dance Brigade incorporated multiple opportunities for youth to express their voice and feel empowered through dance, drumming, and creative writing. In addition to their dance and drumming curriculum, students wrote letters to the next president about the changes they wanted to see in their communities and presented them in front of the pod, made origami butterflies to help bring public attention to immigrant children at the border, and wrote postcards and drew pictures for immigrant children in detention facilities. Notably, 77 percent of youth who responded to the survey reported that they feel more confident about trying new things after participating in the hub.
- **Attend to their academics.** Concerns about learning loss due to COVID and the shift to distance learning made supporting academic engagement one of the hubs’ most urgent priorities. In addition to expressing how much their students enjoyed the program and were gaining self-confidence

For so many kids learning math, learning writing is so difficult, [but] learning how to play an instrument, it is their time to shine. Dancing, that is their time to shine.

-Teaching Artist

Through the arts, they're able to see tangible results and learn that they're capable.

-Teaching Artist

My son had a very special opportunity to learn to build street furniture in which he learned specialized skills, created public art for community use and boosted his self-esteem and also helped him consider architecture as a field of study when he goes to college.

- Parent of 9th grader at YAX

77% of youth survey respondents felt more confident about trying new things after participating in the hub.



[My child] participates more in class and feels safer [because of the arts pod].

- Parent of 6th grader at SF Community Music Center (Jamestown Comm Ctr)

We feel very fortunate to have the option of sending our son to a safe, fun environment which is conducive to better learning and emotional health than distance learning from home, by himself.- - Parent of 4th grader at Dance Mission

through the art activities, the parents of several students also reported that their children were doing better in school as a result: they were attending distance learning more, they were more likely to complete their homework, and they had the support they needed to understand their assignments. Close to three-quarters of youth (71%) reported that they feel more confident about their schoolwork because of their arts pod.

71% of youth survey respondents felt **more confident about their schoolwork** because of their arts pod.



Dance Brigade: Independently Managing a Learning Hub and Arts Pod

The Dance Brigade, A New Group from Wallflower Order (Dance Brigade), is a social change dance theatre company in San Francisco's Mission District neighborhood that formed in 1984 as a feminist dance company. Dance Brigade strives to empower the diverse communities of San Francisco through dance and dance theatre while infusing community building, cultural identities, and social justice into its programming. In its arts programming for youth, Dance Brigade offers dance, Taiko drumming, music, and poetry at its facility, Dance Mission Theater, which is an artist-driven space dedicated to inclusiveness, fairness, and justice. This spotlight highlights how managing a community learning hub and arts pod independently from the CHI brought a host of challenges, yet gave Dance Brigade the freedom to infuse arts and social justice throughout their students' distance learning during the school year.

While running a summer camp that followed city health protocols in 2020, Dance Brigade leaders realized how beneficial and powerful arts programming can be during a time of isolation, fear, and a slew of changes for youth. Students had a safe, enriching place to be while their parents and caregivers worked during the summer. In fall 2020, Dance Brigade, encouraged and supported by the funders of the Arts Learning Pods, continued this effort in a program that combined many features of a community hub within a multi-disciplinary Arts Learning Pod. The Dance Brigade Arts Learning Pod began in September 2020 and continued through the end of the 2020-21 school year, providing both distance learning support and arts education to participants.

As they planned the logistics, Dance Brigade's leadership made a bold decision that placed their Arts Learning Pod in a unique, yet challenging position: to manage the hub activities independently of DCYF's CHI. This decision primarily came about due to the timing of the CHI launch – from the perspective of Dance Brigade's leadership, it was imperative to launch the pod as soon as possible, and on their own timeline, given the urgent challenges their community's students were facing during the pandemic. The student recruitment process was another reason for Dance Brigade's decision to work independently, as their leadership felt that internal recruitment and continuing their own enrollment process would allow them to start pod operations earlier.

Despite their success with independently managing their pod and beginning operations on their own timeline, Dance Brigade encountered several hurdles. A prominent challenge that Dance Brigade faced was in staffing. Because the same teaching artists provided both distance and arts learning supports, many teachers grew exhausted as the pod continued operations. Eventually, Dance Brigade hired additional staff to address the burnout teachers and staff were facing. Additionally, while Dance Brigade's pod hours were longer than the virtual school day, given minimal administrative and staffing support, it did not provide programming during afterschool hours, while CHI hubs provided programming until the end of the working day at 5 or 6 p.m. Further, Dance Brigade had to individually purchase supplies such as arts materials and PPE, as they lacked access to the materials support offered by DCYF through the CHI.

Nevertheless, Dance Brigade's leadership expressed many benefits that came from their decision to work independently. First, Dance Brigade felt they had more control over the operations of their arts hub as they were able to start and run the programming on their own timeline. In this way, staff and teaching artists felt they were able to have a stronger hold on the hours of operation and the activities that made up those hours. Having the freedom to manage those hours helped students stay energized, focused, and in good spirits throughout the day. This also provided teaching artists with the creative freedom to infuse arts teaching into any open spaces and breaks within students' schedules.

I think that because of the political legacy of Dance Brigade and the fact that we're in the Mission and we're in a multicultural setting and we cultivate a multicultural setting, that they're thinking about political issues at 10 and 11 inside the pod. We talked a lot about Black Lives Matter. We talked about the environment a lot. We talked about the election. We talked about the border. We talked about subject matter that a lot of them were really thinking about for the first time. – Arts Hub Staff

Working independently also gave Dance Brigade's teaching artists more time and creative freedom to integrate cultural identity and social justice into their teaching during both the academic and arts learning hours. For example, along with integrating art forms from the African diaspora and Latinx communities, some teachers implemented writing as an art form in a project where students wrote letters to children at the U.S.-Mexico border and to the White House to express their wishes for a better country. Other teachers fused art and real-life learnings together through a faux flea market and a multi-cultural festival where students both presented their art creations and learned about different cultures.

Ultimately, teachers felt that they "planted a seed for lots of things, for creative writing, for dance, for music, for performance, for crafting, for selling... [Students] were able to experience a lot of different kinds of things" during their time spent at Dance Brigade's hub.

Overall, though working independently came with challenges, this decision gave Dance Brigade the freedom and time to integrate various kinds of arts and social justice teachings – while also providing students with distance learning support – and to truly live up to the organization's mission of striving for justice through youth development and art.

I was kind of impressed with how they really got into choreographing their own dances, which they probably wouldn't have done in such a big way if they hadn't been there with the mirror and their music and each other, with an hour off at 10 o'clock in the morning. It was all the perfect setup to discover that. – Arts Hub Staff

"It's been really awesome to see the kids make their own stuff. So they're making their own jewelry. Recently today, kids are making their own snowflakes to sell. So they're learning the value of money and the value of worth, which I think is very important to teach children at any age, the value of the capitalist society that we live in and their own self-worth. Like how much do you value yourself to share yourself with someone?" – Teaching Artist

Artist Teacher Outcomes

Students were not the only ones who benefitted from participation in the arts pods. The teaching artists who taught arts curricula in the pods shared multiple ways in which they, too, benefitted from their experience. Specifically, they noted that participating in the arts pods not only helped sustain them financially during the pandemic, but it also gave them opportunities to increase specific skills that ultimately helped them become better teachers, and to teach in ways that felt meaningful and brought them joy. Specifically, teachers shared that as a result of participating in the Arts Pods Initiative, they were better able to:

- **Effectively facilitate student productivity.** Teachers shared that their experience working in the arts pods provided them with opportunities to think creatively about how to better support student productivity. One teaching artist shared that, because the students were from different schools, in different grades, and had different schedules, they often found themselves in situations where one student might have a long break while others were engaged in classes. This teacher shared that “activating that time is quite an interesting kind of challenge for us as supportive teachers.” She added that she found this challenge “exciting,” noting that she enjoyed this supportive aspect of the work and helping students find ways to be productive during their free time.

[I would ask the student] “How can we activate this time to make it more productive? Do you have any assignments? Do you have anything that you'd like to read? Is there something that you've been really passionate and excited about today that you'd like to, you know, sit with? And can I help you with that?” And it's created this other world of support as a teacher in the arts that I find really fascinating. It's really exciting.

-Teaching Artist

- **Develop their craft as teaching artists.** Artists noted that teaching in the arts pods gave them time that they do not normally have to more fully develop their craft as teachers. They shared that the typical ways in which arts education is offered in public schools does not afford arts teachers the time and space to adequately support student development in the arts, nor to hone their teaching craft. They noted a marked difference between the constrained ways in which they are forced to offer arts education in schools compared to the creative freedom that the arts pods afforded them, which ultimately made the teaching experience more meaningful. As one teaching artist shared, “During this time it has been such a huge blessing to be able to just develop my craft, teaching what I've been teaching, right? Just getting deeper into that and really training my students to become, for example, dancers.”

I would never be able to get to do [this kind of teaching] if I was working as a teaching artist in the public schools for like 45 minutes. I would just be able to just come and do a class and just kind of teach sort of like the bare bones. So that has been such a great, just, it's been great to see my students evolve and to really be shining and performing and executing. And I could say, you know, I'm training, I'm teaching them that.

-Teaching Artist

- **Adapt and respond creatively to student needs and changing contexts.** The unstable environment produced by the COVID-19 pandemic revealed just how important it was to be able to adapt to constantly evolving contexts. The teaching artists shared that this sometimes resulted in different kinds of energy that students would bring into the room, and they had to figure out how best to respond. One teacher shared that she found herself often having to step back and tell herself, “Okay, read the room. What's needed now? What can I bring artistically that will help?” Another teacher shared that sometimes the best response was to “just let things go...to let go of my expectations and let things play out,” which she admitted was difficult for her because she liked making plans and seeing them through. One teacher shared that having such a range of ages in her pod forced her to

adapt her curriculum and practice, which was a new challenge she enjoyed. She explained, “The different age groups is an unusual teaching situation. And I really like that. You do have to approach it in a different way, and think about it in a whole different way, a lesson that can have multi-levels, or [that permit kids to] have different functions within the lesson.”

- **Maintain financial security during the pandemic.** An executive director at one organization described being able to keep artists employed during the pandemic as “my personal success.” She emphasized that as “gig workers,” artists were hit hard by the pandemic and she was therefore not only relieved to not have to reduce hours or lay anyone off, but she was also happy to be able to increase their hours by partnering with other organizations so that they could then teach additional classes. The teaching artists were grateful to have meaningful work during the pandemic and also appreciated being paid well, which is not something artists typically experience. As one teaching artist shared, “I felt so respected as an artist when I did that [arts pod job], so well taken care of, and paid well. And it's like, yes, this is how it should always be. And I think that the funders on this, got it right on, spot on, and also at a time when I needed that work, in a hard time for the arts and COVID. So, it was really a good marriage at that time.”

They're engaged, they're not engaged, they're engaged, they're not engaged. I don't know, I just felt more aware of that than ever, and that, maybe, is my takeaway. I am interested in being a teacher who can pivot quickly, who can read the room, who can really pay attention, and who is engaging. To not impart, but engage. I just have to remind myself, I'm not imparting, I want to make connections, I want to engage. So, I felt like I was really thinking about that, and practicing that. Practicing and failing and succeeding and what that looks like. This was an opportunity for me to try different teaching methods that maybe feel a little different, have different results and different criteria or process.

-Teaching Artist

- **Experience joy in the work.** Multiple teaching artists shared that they found the experience of teaching in the arts pods to be extremely enjoyable for a range of different reasons. One noted how much she enjoyed learning about the students and watching them learn from each other. She talked

about their inherent curiosity and the joy of being able to provide activities to help them explore things they are curious about, like different cultures. Another talked about how good it felt to help students finish a product – to be there with them to witness and celebrate the accomplishment. Another talked about how enjoyable it was to watch them “find their voice in all the different ways, through dance, through Taiko drumming, through letter writing.” Multiple teachers spoke about how much they enjoyed the relationships they built with students, which is not something they are able to do at schools. As one teacher explained, “In afterschool settings, you only see them for an hour a week, then we see them for about an hour a week for a month or two. But that all got compressed into this hub session where you see them every single day. And so, the relationship deepened. The bonds were definitely closer.”

It's interesting that I ended up having the honor of getting to be in this position and interacting with kids when we have a language barrier, and not that I haven't been that experienced before, but it's humbling and awesome. And then also to have art or music to be this common language to lean on... So I felt very lucky to get to experience that gap. And trying to fill it as imaginatively as possible.

-Teaching Artist

Other Outcomes

While this evaluation was primarily focused on understanding student and teacher outcomes related to participation in the pods, a few other outcomes emerged that speak to the value of this initiative. These include:

- **Sense of safety and support for parents, caregivers, and families.** Multiple teaching artists shared that they were told by parents that the pods were an extremely helpful resource for families. One noted that a parent expressed relief in getting support in monitoring their child's academic schedule, which was difficult for working parents to oversee in addition to their own work schedules. Another parent indicated that the home environment was calmer because her daughter was "acting out less" at home, which the parent attributed to having a set schedule and a place to go to every day. And still another parent shared with program staff that the hub/arts pods enabled her to work during the pandemic and essentially saved her career.

We're allowing women to keep working, because otherwise the burden of parenthood and childhood usually falls on women. And a lot of women left the workforce during this pandemic. So I was really impressed with that part of it. And we got feedback from parents saying "I get to keep my job. Thank God you're here."

-Teaching Artist

- **Strengthened relationships and sense of community.** Over and over again, interview respondents spoke of the sense of community that the arts pods helped to foster. This sense of community was rooted in the depth of relationships – on multiple levels – that the model helped make possible. For example,

respondents from youth development agencies and arts organizations alike expressed deep appreciation for their partnership, with many noting a desire to continue working with each other into the next school year. By being able to work with smaller numbers of students for longer periods of time, teaching artists were able to form "close-knit relationships" with the arts pod students. These students, in turn, gained another trusted adult in their lives to whom they could turn for support. Another teaching artist added that working together to create art in the context of something as traumatic as the pandemic amplified that feeling of community. He shared:

[I hope] the students who were here and spent time here always feel they're welcome here. They know that we are here for them, that they're safe here, and that they can just think of us as a resource and as a community.

-Executive Director, arts organization

So while there's a traumatic thing happening and all their families and their backgrounds, etc. – everyone was going through her own specific trauma – we were working on something together that had a major community impact and was happening regardless of the craziness that was currently happening. So tying their efforts back into the community and reminding them that this is a project that is bigger than this thing that happens to be happening right now. That was always, I felt, effective because it gave them purpose. It was also effective to remind myself that we're all in this together as a team working for something that will be really important and something that you can be proud of. And regardless of the pandemic, we're going to keep doing what we have committed ourselves to do.

YBCA: Managing a Community Hub and Arts Pod in a Major Arts Institution

As an arts center located in San Francisco's SoMa neighborhood, Yerba Buena Center for the Arts (YBCA) aims to use the arts and culture as vehicles for community building, change, and societal movement. Prior to the pandemic, YBCA functioned as a major public arts space by bringing in thousands of visitors to its galleries, hosting performance art events and film screenings by featured artists, and leading events that bring community members together. In terms of its youth arts programming, YBCA has historically worked with schools and other organizations to provide in-school and afterschool programming, primarily serving and working with students from the Bessie Carmichael School located in the SoMa neighborhood, though they also worked within the Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Academic Middle School in the Excelsior neighborhood and Mission High in the Mission District prior to their participation as a hub. In their arts programming, they teach photography, sculpting, painting, mural-making, theater, dance theater, visual arts, creative writing, and storytelling..

This spotlight highlights YBCA's successful experience in leveraging its facilities and expertise as an arts organization to support a comprehensive, all-day community hub and arts pod – something it had never tried before in its 28-year history.

As COVID-19 seeped into daily life, YBCA leaders wondered how they could better invest in and use their arts expertise in service to their community – especially for the young people in the SoMa neighborhood, who would likely face some of the greatest barriers to finding support during the pandemic. As such, leaders made the decision to delve into programming that YBCA had never done in its history as a major arts institution: joining DCYF's CHI to run a full, on-site community hub with both distance and arts learning. By partnering with Mission Graduates and the Bessie Carmichael schools to manage the hub and arts pod in their galleries, YBCA was able to offer its spaces during this time of need to thoroughly support and invest in the community during the virtual school year.

This was one of the first times that we've done something at this level [related to youth education], where it was a partnership with a city agency, like DCYF, to support students for their academics, as well as the arts and creative programming that YBCA can provide... This is the first time that it's been on-site and in partnership with so many agencies. – Arts Pod Staff

Once YBCA's leadership began brainstorming preparation for managing the hub and arts pod, they came across a challenging yet thrilling opportunity for the organization: how to re-imagine their arts gallery spaces into classrooms that could safely accommodate young children. Further, it was a challenge to plan how they would use their arts spaces and experience within the comprehensive, all-day programming for youth that made up the hub initiative – this type of planning was completely new for YBCA's leadership.

Within a span of two weeks, YBCA's leadership mapped the specifics of what they would need to creatively transform their space for all-day youth programming and expressed

that “taking stock of all of your resources, being at your space and seeing what's welcoming within your space, seeing what's a barrier in your space, thinking about how then you can partner with other neighborhood organizations” were among the many steps they took to turn their plan into a reality. YBCA's Programs & Public Life team worked directly with their featured artists to engage in a process to examine artwork positioning in terms of student safety and ensuring adequate space for the needs of teaching artists. Furthermore, YBCA also engaged their teaching artists to collaborate with exhibiting artist Caleb Duarte to design and implement ways for students to contribute to the development of *Monument as Living Memory*, a collective architectural installation meant to uplift community voice and creativity just outside YBCA's entrance. Through all the intensive planning, collaboration, and transformations, YBCA ultimately created a safe and rich learning environment where students were able to focus on their academic work with all the necessary technology and teaching materials, while also immersing themselves in the arts.

Just the site we're at [in] the YBCA... It's a gallery space with 20-foot ceilings, big walls, tons of light, there were a few other artists showing their work during the pandemic. The students can look at it and just look at this weird stuff and trip off art, you know, like what's going on and we can question it, we could look at it, we could ignore it. It's just, they're living with us. And so, the site specific nature of the hub was so important to this. – Teaching Artist

YBCA's teaching artists emphasized how being surrounded by an abundance of art in a vast gallery space with high ceilings and an ample amount of sunlight contributed to both their and their students' ability to consistently think creatively during both distance and arts learning. Students were energized and passionate to contribute to the arts at YBCA and to finish their own artwork as “they were using photography, they were using painting, they were doing mural making... They got to see themselves literally as part of this public art piece that was in front of YBCA.”

Further, YBCA's teaching artists expressed that teaching their craft and art forms in an art gallery was essential. During the school year and often in afterschool programming, teaching artists are provided with limited space and materials in school settings, almost as if they are given “the room that no one's used for 10 years...these spaces that nobody wants, neglected spaces.” Thus, the teaching artists at YBCA expressed the importance of teaching youth in an arts center that prioritizes the sharing and resourcing of arts knowledge.

YBCA's decision to manage a comprehensive community hub with an arts pod, and to work through the challenges of reimagining the gallery spaces in this way for the first time in their organization's history, had a lasting impact on the students and teaching artists and paved a new path for on-site youth programming and partnerships at YBCA. As YBCA leadership expressed, having youth in their galleries brought a bright, creative energy to the spaces: “It was great just to be around kids again, because they're not around all the time. And it's not like our programming is necessarily focused, at least on-site..., for K through five. So that was just great to have that energy around.”

Key Takeaways from the Arts Pods Initiative

The arts pods experience affirmed what the teaching artists already knew: that the arts are powerful, multi-modal vehicles for student engagement, creative expression, and learning. Thus, funding pods focused on providing intensive arts education from skilled artist educators proved to be an effective strategy for supporting young people, particularly during a time of significant trauma and upheaval. Moreover, the way in which the initiative was implemented was remarkable, in that it not only attended to the needs of young people, but also to the needs of teaching artists, providing them with the means to teach art in ways that honor their craft and do justice to the art forms they teach. When asked to reflect on their experiences in the arts pods and what lessons they want to impart to the larger field, respondents offered these key takeaways:

- **The arts are essential to the development of happier, healthier human beings and must continue to be funded.** The arts provided students with different ways to engage with each other and approach learning. While the teaching artists have always known this, they shared that the nature of online schooling during the pandemic made even more visible the value of this aspect of the arts. Students were on screens for longer than was healthy and they were clearly “Zoomed out.” The arts pods gave them the space to step away from screens and explore different art forms and different cultures, contribute to their community, and to form strong relationships with others, which was so important in a time that was marked by isolation. The arts gave students an outlet to express their emotions through words, color, music, and movement. The arts pods created spaces for joy, for students and for teachers.
- **Artists feel that they, and art generally, have been undervalued for too long – this needs to change.** A common theme across the focus groups with teaching artists was a sense of gratitude and satisfaction for this initiative’s focus on providing them with the space, time, and resources to teach art in ways that were meaningful for them as well as their students. As noted previously, the ways in which they are typically required to teach art, particularly in public schools, made the process of teaching incredibly constrained. In those settings, teaching artists were forced to teach to large classes of students, in “bursts” and at infrequent intervals. And they were not paid well for their efforts, which put many of them in the position of having to work across multiple schools in order to cobble together enough classes to make a living. This transactional model of arts education shortchanges not just teachers but students as well, limiting their ability to gain the full benefits of a strong arts education.
- **Strategic partnerships, like those formed through this initiative, were incredibly valuable and should continue.** The partnerships between arts organizations and the youth development organizations that were part of the CHI enabled these organizations to maximize resources and to leverage each other’s strengths. One respondent said she “wished there were more of these partnerships happening regularly so that you’re not trying to do something that is not your core mission. Instead, you’re partnering with someone [who has that core mission] and then you share resources. It’s just better for everyone.” An executive director at one of the arts organizations noted that the added benefit of these kinds of collaborative partnerships is that they do not perpetuate the harmful model where organizations are “pitted against one another for funds, but [instead], they

This was the first time in my life where I got to be at one location, really practicing as a teaching artist for a few hours and still be able to do my other work as an artist, as a dancer, as a performer, as well too, and make a living. And live in San Francisco to be able to do that.

-Teaching Artist

are joyfully supported in ways that they need” so that they could co-create a positive experience for themselves and their students.

- **The city and school system should invest more to ensure that all students have access to a robust arts education.** The arts pods experience was unique, enabling deep engagement in the arts by both students and teachers. Interviewees and focus group respondents insisted that this experience should not be limited to just those students who were able to participate in the arts pods. Several shared that, while their organizations offer strong afterschool arts programs, they believe they could make a bigger difference if they were able to provide this level of high-quality arts education in all public schools. They noted that it is extremely difficult to find funding for in-school arts programming, and yet this kind of programming is especially critical for black and brown students, who tend to have more challenges attending community-based afterschool programs. At the same time, they also note there should be more general operating support and funding for community arts centers. Several noted that there are empty storefronts across San Francisco, for example, that could be “activated by the arts.”

The Arts Pods Initiative was made possible through generous funding by philanthropic partners who believed not only in the power of arts education, but who were willing to invest in ways that enabled its untapped potential to be realized and that conveyed the respect due to teaching artists for their remarkable skills and contributions. The Arts Pods Initiative was successful because of the creative talents of these teaching artists and their commitment to their craft and to the students they serve, and because of the resourcefulness and collaborative spirit of all of the initiative’s partners. The way in which grantees and their partners constantly and creatively pivoted in response to shifting needs and an ever-changing context was awe-inspiring. Moreover, their concern for and dedication to the well-being of San Francisco’s children and families were deeply moving. We are humbled by their efforts and grateful for the opportunity to document their journey. It has been an honor to serve as their evaluator.

APPENDIX A: EVALUATION QUESTIONS

Undergirding the effort to develop Arts Learning Pods was the belief that creative arts learning contributes to children’s intellectual development and social emotional well-being. Recognizing the significant challenges that youth and their families were facing as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and the loss of in-person schooling, those working to develop the Arts Learning Pods hoped that the infusion of arts could help students grappling with stress and trauma, provide good work experiences for arts teachers, and benefit parents by giving their children new outlets and means of expression. To unpack these hopes and translate them into key areas of inquiry for the evaluation, SPR held discussions with staff from the Walter and Elise Haas Fund, the Clarence E. Heller Charitable Foundation, and the Community Music Center. The following evaluation questions draw from the information shared in these discussions.

Program Implementation

- Where are the Arts Learning Pods located? (Neighborhood and facility type.)
- Who are the students being served through the Arts Learning Pods? (Student demographics—age, gender, race)
- What are the different models of implementation for the Arts Learning Pods?
 - What role do they play in their hubs? What is the model for those that are not part of a CHI hub?
- What are the different arts foci supported through these hubs? What does the arts programming dosage look like across pods?
- What are the strengths of the Arts Learning Pods? How do these strengths differ by site and what factors contribute to these strengths?
- What has been challenging about implementing the Arts Learning Pods? What strategies did they use to address their challenges?

Student Outcomes

- Do youth enjoy being part of an Arts Learning Pod?
- How did the Arts Learning Pods support academic engagement?
- How did the Arts Learning Pods support students’ social emotional well-being?
- How did the Arts Learning Pods increase interest and engagement in the arts?

Artist Teacher Outcomes

- How has the experience of teaching in the Arts Learning Pods affected the teaching practices of the arts educators, or the way they think about their role as artist educators? Has it had an impact on their engagement or enjoyment of teaching the arts?
- How has the experience of teaching in the Arts Learning Pods, in the context of a pandemic, shape their thinking about the value of arts education and the role it can play for young people?

Parent/Caregiver Outcomes

- To what extent has participation in the Arts Learning Pods supported the overall well-being of participants families?
- Did parents/caregivers find hub participation valuable generally? Did they find specific value in having a strong arts component incorporated into the hub?

Field-level Learnings

- What can the Arts Learning Pod experience teach educators about the value of arts education generally and the role it can play in the context of significant social upheaval and trauma?
- What recommendations can be lifted up for education leaders and youth development professionals to extend the successful practices and learnings from the Arts Learning Pods into existing educational and youth development programming?

APPENDIX B: EVALUATION DATA SOURCES

This evaluation was informed by the following data sources:

- **Administrative Data (June/July 2021).** SPR reviewed attendance and participant demographic data from DCYF's content management system (CMS) for arts pods funded by DCYF, from Recreation and Parks Department for the pods operated by RPD, and from hub managers for the sites that did not function as part of a CHI hub.
- **Youth Survey (May 2021).** SPR added specific questions related to the Arts Learning Pods to the CHI Youth Survey, for those pods that are part of CHI hubs. SPR also developed a separate youth survey for Arts Learning Pods that were not part of the CHI and/or for students who did not meet the age requirement for the DCYF survey.⁷ DCYF administered surveys for the CHI hubs and arts pods program staff administered surveys to youth participating in pods that were not part of the CHI. Ultimately, 22 youth at three of the arts pods completed the survey. These three hubs represented the deepest and most sustained arts content. In total, 55 percent of the youth at these sites completed the survey.
- **Parent Survey (April 2021).** A parent survey for parents/caregivers of students in elementary and middle school was deployed by DCYF as part of the DCYF CHI evaluation. SPR added specific questions related to the Arts Learning Pods for those that were part of CHI hubs. SPR crafted separate surveys for Arts Learning Pods that were not part of the CHI, which those programs administered themselves (with SPR analyzing that data). A total of 31 parents/caregivers from five of the arts pods responded to the survey.
- **Teaching Artist Focus Groups (May 2021).** SPR conducted two focus groups with teaching artists to learn about the ways in which the arts were infused into their hubs, their experiences as educators in the arts pods, their perspectives on the strengths and challenges of implementing the arts pods, their perspectives on outcomes associated with pod participation, and their insights about the value and role of arts education, as well as recommendations around continued arts programming efforts for the field. A total of 11 teaching artists participated in these focus groups.
- **Interviews with program staff (June/July 2021).** SPR conducted four sets of interviews with different stakeholders including hub staff, arts educators, and hub partners to gain more context about the arts pods, gather more information about outcomes and learning-focused reflections, and learn about unique facets of particular pods. These interviews, which included nine respondents, informed the development of the arts pods spotlights included in this report.

⁷ The DCYF CHI Hub Participant Survey was only administered to youth in grades 5 and above. SPR developed a youth survey appropriate for students as young as 3rd grade and tailored specifically to the Arts Learning Pods experience.

APPENDIX C: ARTS PODS GRANTEE ORGANIZATIONS



The Jamestown Community Center is a Mission District-based youth development organization cultivating academics, arts, and sports to enrich the lives of underserved youth.



Dance Mission Theatre is an artist-driven, feminist organization dedicated to fostering social change.



Zaccho Dance Theatre is a nonprofit dance company that provides performing arts classes to youth and adults.



Success Centers serves marginalized populations that have been most impacted by unjust policies like redlining, mass incarceration, and drug wars.



Youth Art Exchange seeks to amplify the voices of San Francisco public school students through a meaningful, in-depth arts education.



Centering artists as essential to social and cultural movement. **Yerba Buena Center for the Arts** is reimagining the role an arts institution can play in the community.



Community Music Center makes high-quality music education accessible to people of all ages, backgrounds, and abilities, regardless of financial means.



Flyaway Productions performs off-the-ground dances that expose the range and power of female physicality. They also teach, advocate for racial justice, and collaborate with Bay Area dance artists.

APPENDIX D: FOCUS GROUP AND INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS

Community Music Center

- Julie Rulyak Steinberg, *Executive Director*
- Beth Wilmurt, *Teaching Artist*
- Andrea Rodriguez, *Teaching Artist*

Jamestown Community Center

- Nelly Sapinski, *Executive Director*

Dance Brigade: Dance Mission Theatre

- Krissy Keefer, *Artistic Director and Executive Director*
- Fredrika Keefer, *Grrrl Brigade Manager*
- Dominique Hargrove, *Teaching Artist*
- Emma Miller, *Teaching Artist*
- Debbie Taylor, *Teaching Artist*

Success Centers

- Geoffrey Simpson, Jr. *Teaching Artist*

Yerba Buena Center for the Arts (YBCA)

- Rebeka Rodriguez, *Civic Engagement Manager*
- Lisa Elliott, *Director of Events and Partnerships*
- Sandie Arnold, *Development Director*
- Fred Alvarado, *Teaching Artist*
- Kim Epifano, *Teaching Artist*

Youth Art Exchange (Architecture Pod)

- Raffaella Falchi, *Executive Director*
- Sofia Airaghi, *Program Director*
- Logan Kelley, *Teaching Artist*

Zaccho Dance Theatre

- Flo Dabo-Kemp, *Teaching Artist*
- Terrence Paschal, *Teaching Artist*