

ADVOCACY FOR the arts and ARTS EDUCATION

Any review of current public policies pertaining to the arts and arts education—their specific language and their implementation—also necessitates consideration of the status of advocacy for such policies, their implementation, and their improvement. In short, Pennsylvania today has too little effective advocacy effort by various stakeholders on behalf of the arts and arts education, too few champions among state policymakers, and too little effort by state agencies that are in a position to build public awareness and support.

While Citizens for the Arts in Pennsylvania has great potential as a statewide advocacy agent and is in the midst of important self-examination, it currently has too little membership and public support, has limited resources and staff, and is too dependent on resources from a single state agency. In addition, the organization recently convened a diverse group of arts, historical and cultural organizations to explore common interests and the potential of short-term and long-term joint advocacy efforts.

The Pennsylvania Alliance for Arts Education, a member of the national network of statewide alliances historically supported by the Kennedy Center Alliance for Arts Education Network (KCAAEN), has a mission that includes coalition-building and public advocacy, but has very modest resources, a limited range of partners, and a limited presence, mostly in some areas of eastern Pennsylvania. The Pennsylvania Alliance currently limits its activities to preserving and promoting specialist-based, K-12 arts education.

There indeed are other statewide organizations, several of them representative of arts educators, that have growing interest in public policy issues, but which in most cases lack staff or real capacity for effective advocacy on a major and sustainable basis. On the positive side, in some geographic areas of the state, there exist local and regional arts organizations that are well-staffed, have significant public membership bases, distinguished board members, and some experience with (and perhaps growing appetite for) public advocacy. In addition, some museums also have the staffing and commitment to engage in public policy advocacy efforts—albeit mostly to serve individual institutional needs.

Another plus is that parents increasingly recognize the importance of the arts in providing their children with a well-rounded education that meets their individual learning needs. One of the most popular programs of the Pennsylvania Parent Teacher Association (PTA) is the Reflections program, in which students at various grade levels from across the state can submit works of art in dance choreography, film production, literature, musical composition, photography, and visual arts. Operated in conjunction with the national PTA, Reflections eventually results in national contest winners, based upon artistic merit, creativity, mastery of the medium, and interpretation of an annual theme.

Despite these assets and potential assets, there is no ongoing forum for state-level advocacy collaboration among arts and arts education stakeholders. While historically there was apparently an annual “arts-in-education” day each spring in the Capitol, it is no longer conducted. Any statewide advocacy “campaign” to promote the arts and arts education in recent years has generally been a



short-term reaction to proposed changes in tax law or state budgets, but nothing planned as a collaborative and sustained effort among stakeholders to proactively build awareness and support among the public and policymakers.

There should be noted a new coalition among four organizations representing arts educators begun during 2011 to advance a state policy agenda. And importantly, the Pennsylvania Music Educators Association does continue its annual program in the state Capitol to exhibit student musical talent, did conduct an advocacy day in Harrisburg in fall 2011, and supports the staff resources required for these efforts and for a regular presence in Harrisburg.

Unfortunately, a review of legislation introduced in recent years reveals practically no interest by state lawmakers in arts and arts education issues. There is very infrequent evidence of legislative committee attention to issues pertaining to the arts and arts education. In contrast to attention to many other education issues, some serious gubernatorial candidates and many legislative candidates feel no political compulsion to say anything about the arts and arts education. The “Arts Education Awareness Day” in the state Capitol championed by former House Speaker Matt Ryan has not been observed for several years. On the positive side, the Pennsylvania Department of Education does still provide support, in collaboration with Sargent Art, for an exhibition of student artwork shown in the Department annually during Youth Arts Month (March).

As EPLC prepares to move into the advocacy phase of its Arts and Education Initiative, we want to be clear that our goal is to help develop an advocacy movement and hand it off to others for whom that work is their core mission. While AEI is aligned with our mission, our objective through AEI is to work with partners, help them build their own capacity, and add value to their current and future endeavors. That is what we will attempt to do in the coming months as we work to support the recommendations that follow.



Student from the Open Stage of Harrisburg School. Photo by Don Alsedek.