

introduction

Pennsylvania has a rich history of public and state policymaker support for the arts and arts education, and has, in times past, often been a leader with state policy that has valued and supported arts education for PK-12 students and others. But in Pennsylvania during the past ten years in particular, we have witnessed the convergence of public policies that undermine previous assets and take us in a wrong direction. These include the evolution of national and state education policies that have built an education accountability system that largely ignores arts education; the failure to enforce existing state laws and to sustain assets such as the Governor’s School for the Arts; a trend to de-fund direct state support for museums, the arts, arts education, and arts education staff in the Department of Education; and PK-12 state funding policies that have too long tolerated very unequal educational opportunities across 500 school districts, and most recently have contributed to the erosion of arts education opportunities in schools and communities for many thousands of students. All of these disturbing trends are, largely, the conscious or inadvertent result of decisions made by state policymakers. At a time when the value of arts education for citizens of all ages is increasingly recognized and considered imperative, it is also imperative that state policymakers and community leaders at all levels take action to assure the vibrancy of arts education in all schools and all communities throughout the Commonwealth.

During the last two centuries, human population has grown, becoming more densely congregated and more diverse. Human economy has become increasingly complex, technical, and interrelated. In the most highly developed countries, the agrarian economy has given way to the industrial economy, which has given way to the information economy, which has morphed into the knowledge economy.¹ Today we live in a world of seemingly limitless change and creativity. It is a world that increasingly belongs to what Richard Florida, a former Carnegie Mellon University professor and now Professor of Business and Creativity at the University of Toronto, refers to as the “creative class.” Indeed, “the wealth generated by the creative sector is astounding. It accounts for nearly half all wage and salary income in the United States, \$1.7 trillion, as much as the manufacturing and service

sectors combined.”² If Florida is correct, information and knowledge are becoming mere tools to be used by the creative class as the knowledge economy is increasingly eclipsed by the creative economy.³ In less developed countries, this process is taking place in highly-compressed timeframes.

As Daniel Pink so succinctly summarizes it, “the last few decades have belonged to a certain kind of person with a



certain kind of mind—computer programmers who could crank code, lawyers who could craft contracts, MBAs who could crunch numbers. But the keys to the kingdom are changing hands. The future belongs to a very different kind of person with a very different kind of mind—creators and empathizers, pattern recognizers, and meaning makers. These people—artists, inventors, designers, storytellers, caregivers, consolers, big picture thinkers—will now reap society’s richest rewards and share its greatest joys.”⁴

Our future—as Pennsylvanians and Americans—depends upon the creativity of our citizens. Beyond its promise of economic prosperity, creativity is fundamental to the democratic lives of our communities. The sense of identity and well-being we feel as members of those communities and the increasingly pervasive social networks within which we relate to others are products of collective imagination and the establishment of new ideas and traditions. Creativity is not just for the talented few. It is not a frill. It is central to who we are as individuals and what we hope to become as a society.

The arts teach us that creativity, innovation, and imagination are acquired and crucial. Through practice, perseverance, and precision we learn in music, dance, theatre, and the visual arts that creatively tackling the issues and challenges of our time requires our consistent effort. From an early age, the arts contribute to the development of the active human mind, body, and spirit. They promote interactive engagement with people, places, materials, and ideas. They are a vehicle for our much-needed expression of individual and collective identity. Moreover, the arts bring people together for shared, meaningful experience. They give people the means to develop and use their unique voices in families, neighborhoods, and beyond. They teach us to seek understanding of perspectives different from our own. People must have opportunities to learn in and through the arts so they can increase their own capacity for creativity.

Two Pennsylvania community efforts are worth mentioning to set the stage for what follows. The Pittsburgh Cultural Trust was founded in 1984 with the mission of revitalizing a 14-square-block downtown area, “turning a seedy red-light district into a magnet destination for arts lovers, residents, visitors, and business owners.”⁵ The Trust is a unique public-private partnership that has re-

“Success is something
you assemble from
components you discover
in your soul and
your imagination.”

—Bill Strickland
President and CEO,
Manchester Bidwell Corporation

ceived support from foundations, corporations, government agencies, and private citizens in its continuing—and so far highly successful—effort to restore historic theatres, construct new performance venues, commission public arts projects, and develop urban parks and riverfront recreation areas in this Pittsburgh Cultural District. The Cultural District is home to major performance companies such as the Pittsburgh Symphony, unique cultural assets such as the August Wilson Center for African American Culture, and the Pittsburgh Public Schools High School for Creative and Performing Arts, as well as numerous smaller art galleries, performance spaces, restaurants, apartments, and condominiums. Today the Cultural District attracts over two million visitors annually—generating an estimated economic impact of \$303 million per year. The spirit of cultural enrichment has spread across the city to innumerable storefront art galleries and display and performance venues in neighborhoods beyond downtown.

Williamsport, 200 miles northeast of Pittsburgh, is the second community effort for review. It is not a major metropolis (29,000 people, just barely within the 40 largest municipalities in the state).⁶ It is not wealthy (median household income of \$27,000, slightly more than half the statewide median of almost \$50,000; 28 percent live below the poverty line).⁷ It does not have cultural assets on the scale of Philadelphia or Pittsburgh, but it has community and education leaders who understand the value of the arts to both children and adults and the potential for synergy between the schools and the larger

community. An old downtown theatre was rescued from the wrecking ball through the efforts of citizens, businesses, the Williamsport-Lycoming Community Foundation, city government, and Pennsylvania College of Technology. The historic renovation resulted in a venue for the Community Arts Center (CAC), which is home to music, dance, theatre, movies, family activities, and special events. Performers include traveling theatre companies, the Williamsport Symphony Orchestra, a local youth orchestra, and others. The CAC presents a family series of shows for children and their parents and has joined with the Community Theater League to put on student theatre productions in the summer. A regional collaborative supports summer musical performances by students. CAC collaborates with local superintendents

and school boards to host thousands of students annually for matinée performances in its educational series of shows specifically selected to support the school curriculum, and local artists work beside teachers in the schools.⁸

Effective state policy could support similar efforts to create more robust cultural communities in cities and towns across the Commonwealth.

