

Dallas Arts Learning Initiative (DALI)



THE ENTRY POINT

A citywide collaborative of over fifty arts and cultural organizations, an urban school district, and a city government to ensure equal access to arts learning opportunities, in and out of school, to all Dallas ISD elementary students

THE CHALLENGE

Can the cultural organizations throughout a city (parks, schools, libraries, cultural institutions, community-based organizations, and others) become a system that supports the learning of children and families throughout the city's neighborhoods?

THE PARTNERS

Big Thought

City of Dallas

- Office of Cultural Affairs
- Park and Recreation Department
- Dallas Public Library system
- Dallas Police Department
- Public Information Office
- Office of Strategic Customer Services

Dallas Independent School District

Dallas arts and cultural community

The Story

Dallas is the ninth-largest city in the United States. Its major school system, Dallas Independent School District (ISD), is almost entirely African American and Hispanic and serves many economically disadvantaged communities (see sidebar). Along with many other urban districts, the schools have struggled to provide more than basic skills.

At the same time, Dallas has a thriving cultural community, with major downtown museums, a symphony, and theaters; vibrant Latino and African American media, theater, and galleries; and libraries, parks, and learning centers spread throughout its neighborhoods. Beginning in the mid-1990s,

Dallas Independent School District: Quick Facts

Superintendent: Michael Hinojosa

Number of schools	225
Total enrollment	159,752
White	5.1%
African American	29.7%
Hispanic	64.1%
Asian	0.9%
Native American	0.2%
Limited English proficiency	29.6%
Students with disabilities	8.7%
Economically disadvantaged	82.8%

Sources: Dallas Independent School District, 2006–2007 Fact Sheet and School Snapshots (2005–2006 school year)

a collaborative of these organizations, led by a managing partner, Big Thought, began to ask, “Couldn’t we create a citywide network of learning opportunities – in and out of school – that would excite students about learning? Given the schools’ responsibility for core academic skills, how do we ensure that every child also has the opportunity to imagine, innovate, and create?”

Providing Elementary Students with Equal Access to Arts Learning through Partnerships

In 1987, Big Thought (originally Young Audiences of North Texas) was founded to manage and implement a variety of arts and cultural programs in schools across north Texas. Over time, Big Thought began to build partnerships with city agencies and school systems to broaden the delivery of their direct services and to deepen their relationship with educators and youth workers so that the programming delivered would have greater impact. One such partnership, in existence since 1998, is Dallas ArtsPartners. Big Thought serves as the managing partner for this three-way collaboration between the Dallas ISD, the City of Dallas Office of Cultural Affairs, and a coalition of more than fifty arts and cultural organizations.

The mission of ArtsPartners is to provide an effective infrastructure for delivery of professional development and cultural programming to ensure all Dallas ISD elementary students equal access to arts and cultural programming and to ensure that, through these programs, there is an increase in the quality of teaching and learning in general elementary classrooms. By pairing school-day performances, field-trip performances, artist residencies, master classes, workshops, and guided tours with arts-integration professional development for non-art-specialized teachers, the partnership builds learning opportunities for students as well as teachers. All of the services incorporate firsthand experience with creative professionals such as artists, musicians, and scientists.

Recently, a rigorous longitudinal evaluation of ArtsPartners was completed, in response to community demand for accountability.¹ The results of the evaluation were striking. Students who participated in ArtsPartners showed significantly more and different kinds of learning behaviors, such as self-initiated learning, drawing on resources, and alternative learning, as well as improved classroom behaviors. Students who also took part in interviews and discussions of their creative work scored significantly better on standardized reading tests. Their writing was more likely to contain new ideas and to have a distinctive “voice” or style. Finally, and most important, gains persisted over time.

This evaluation was important in two ways. First, the report showed that using artistic and cultural experiences as an integral part of a learning system can make a substantial difference.

¹ D. P. Wolf, J. Bransom, and K. Denson, forthcoming, *More Than Measuring: Program Evaluation as an Opportunity to Build the Capacity of Communities*, Battle Creek, MI: W. K. Kellogg Foundation. This report will be available on the Web sites of Big Thought <www.bigthought.org> and the Annenberg Institute for School Reform <www.annenberginstitute.org> beginning in April 2007.

Stripped-back curricula tailored only to state tests can “cheat” poor and less-privileged students of an enriched set of learning opportunities. Second, because the study was a collaborative effort between

national researchers and local educators, local researchers, and community members, the process built local understanding of and demand for an expanded set of learning opportunities for every student.

Dallas Arts Learning Initiative: Toward a Smart Education System

The striking results of the evaluation and surge of interest in arts and culture as part of a wider educational system in Dallas has led to a new, bold effort based on the foundation and success of ArtsPartners. The Dallas Arts Learning Initiative (DALI) is founded on the belief that social change in the Dallas community can be stimulated and sustained by surrounding youth with high-quality, accessible arts learning opportunities throughout the day, both in and out of school. Therefore, over the next five years, DALI will focus on the three integrated areas that affect youth access to, paths within, and accomplishment in the arts: arts learning in school; arts integration, which takes place primarily in schools and sometimes out of school; and arts in communities – at neighborhood centers and institutions, with local teachers, mentors, and models such as older students and family members (see Figure 1). The goal is to create a coherent systemic reform with arts and culture providing examples, energy, and a first wave of major resources.

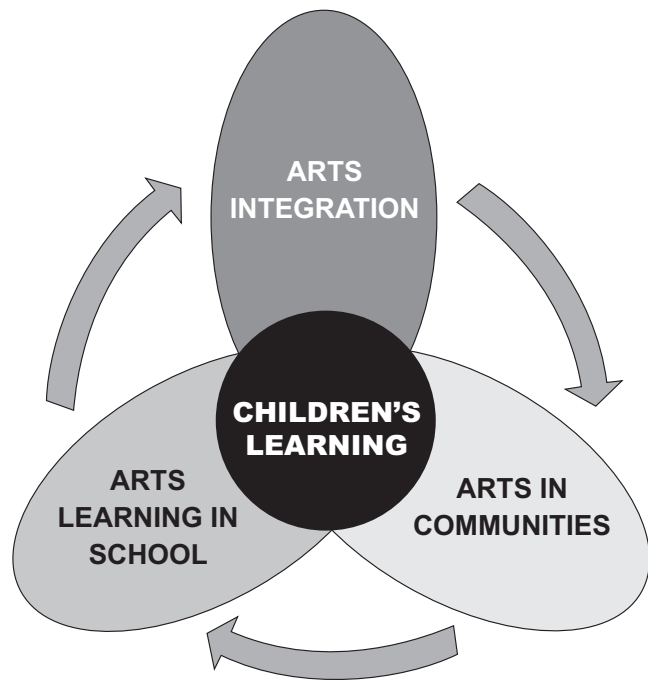


Figure 1. Three integrated areas of arts learning for DALI

Though DALI is focused specifically on arts and culture, this effort could provide a strong model for a system of learning that could be extended to other areas such as literacy or mathematics. DALI is beginning to work on creating pathways to connect in-school arts learning with out-of-school opportunities and increase coordination and cohesion among arts and cultural organizations to ensure that all students have access to high-quality content.

Strengths, Challenges, and Scaling Up

DALI is beginning with several significant strengths. As a natural outgrowth of Big Thought's ArtsPartners initiative, the existing partnerships – between Big Thought and arts providers in the community and between Big Thought, Dallas ISD, and the City of Dallas – are very successful and long established. Big Thought staff members said that the district is a “great resource for us,” specifically mentioning the new superintendent's endorsement of DALI. Several people also mentioned the strong support of Craig Welle, the district's executive director of fine and performing arts, and the district's parent-involvement coordinator, who are described as being involved and engaged with Big Thought.

A recently announced major accomplishment for the DALI partnership was that beginning in 2006, Dallas ISD will hire 140 new arts specialists and that each elementary school student will receive a guaranteed forty-five minutes of both art and music every week. Sixty arts specialists have already been hired. Students will be guaranteed both arts and music instruction for the first time since 1979 – this will significantly increase the reach of arts education for students within schools in Dallas ISD.

Outside of school, DALI is just beginning to scale up efforts to reach students and parents in their neighborhoods. DALI is building this out-of-school work by identifying three neighborhoods and the arts resources within each of them – schools, recreation centers, houses of worship, and libraries, for example. After identifying those locations where arts are happening already, Big Thought liaisons will coordinate arts learning opportunities for families and children. They will also work with local parents and community members to build capacity and support for the arts within neighborhoods. This hub model, modeled on the library system, will expand to ten neighborhoods in three years, with the ultimate goal of reaching approximately thirty neighborhoods.

However, there remain significant challenges for DALI, especially for their out-of-school initiatives. Both Big Thought staff and parents noted the difficulty in getting more parents involved in arts programming. For example, two Latina mothers who attended a ceramics class at their children’s elementary school praised the arts programming offered to them; both noted that they were able to take the arts skills they acquired in that class and teach them to their children at home. But they also said that they had had difficulty in getting other mothers to come to these free classes at their school. Others said that despite the popularity of Big Thought programming that brings parents to museums and other cultural institutions, some tickets for families still go unused. A Big Thought staff member said that there are several barriers to greater parent involvement, including income, transportation, and lack of social connection with the campus. However, she added that even though parents might be intimidated and not used to being involved at the school, “maybe they’ll come to the library or rec center” for arts programming.

Creating and expanding quality partnerships is another challenge. There have also only been indirect discussions with churches and other faith communities where a great deal of arts learning takes place. And a director of a local arts organization that partners with Big Thought saw some “silo-ization” among arts organizations in the city and wants to see more coordination.

Questions for Forum Participants from the Dallas Site Team

- How do we build a neighborhood governance structure for the design and distribution of arts resources in neighborhoods?
- How do we build effective bridges for inner-city families into the city’s cultural institutions?

- What strategies are most important to successful communication efforts in neighborhoods?
- As an outsider, how would you describe this work? What is the impact of programming like this? Do you see it as arts education work? School reform? Community development?

Site Team Members

Gigi Antoni has been executive director of Big Thought for over ten years. Under her leadership, Big Thought has embraced the practice of community partnerships, as is evidenced by successful programs like ArtsPartners and new initiatives like DALI.

Hollis Brashear served for fourteen years as a Dallas ISD trustee, including three one-year terms as board president. He has long been a community advocate for education in Dallas and serves on the DALI steering committee. He is an engineer by profession.

Laurie Evans is director of the Dallas Public Library system and serves on the DALI steering committee. Under her direction, the Dallas Public Library system plays a key role in youth and adult community programming in the arts and other areas.

Maria Muñoz-Blanco is executive director of the City of Dallas Office of Cultural Affairs, the city department that supports cultural organizations and facilities throughout the city. She serves on the DALI steering committee and is a key partner in implementing DALI's community-based strategies.

Gina Thorsen is senior program director at Big Thought, responsible for the implementation of DALI. Her history at Big Thought includes leadership of the ArtsPartners program, the communications department, and, now, research and program development.

Craig Welle is executive director for fine and performing arts with Dallas ISD, responsible for arts instruction in the district. He works collaboratively with many community programs, chairs the DALI lead working group, and acts as DALI's main Dallas ISD contact.

For More Information

- Big Thought: <www.bigthought.org>
- ArtsPartners: <www.dallasartspartners.org>
- Dallas Independent School District: <www.dallasisd.org>
- City of Dallas: <www.dallascityhall.com>
- Dallas Arts Learning Initiative (DALI): <www.dallasartslearning.org>