

The Power of “We”: A Journey through Collaboration

By Frank Baiocchi

As grantmakers, we realized we were engaged in similar conversations – just not with each other.

We acknowledged the need to communicate more effectively among ourselves to strengthen our individual work and deepen our collective impact. And we recognized we all had been in this situation before.

Funders of arts education in Chicago have a long history of working together. Chicago Arts Partnerships in Education (CAPE) was created in 1992 by a group of funders and other arts education stakeholders to build sustainable partnerships among schools, arts organizations, artists and funders so that relevant, effective arts education could be provided in classrooms throughout the Chicago Public School (CPS) district. Funders came together again in 2002 to form the Chicago Arts Education Collaborative (CAEC) after a Chicago Community Trust-sponsored survey demonstrated that the typical CPS student received less than one hour of arts education a week during the 2001–02 school year. In 2005, the Board of Education of the City of Chicago and the Chicago Community Trust (on behalf of the CAEC) entered into a public-private partnership agreement to establish an Office of Arts Education in the district and develop a plan to reform arts education in CPS. Many funders have been instrumental in the initial and ongoing development of ChiArts, the city’s first public high school to offer a college-preparatory, pre-professional arts training program, which opened in 2009.



Frank Baiocchi

All of these accomplishments are extremely meaningful and resonate powerfully today. CPS students and teachers have access to new, innovative arts education programs. The Office of Arts Education remains at the center of the district’s efforts to expand and deepen arts learning opportunities and has developed *The Chicago Guide for Teaching and Learning in the Arts*, a comprehensive scope and sequence manual in four arts disciplines for all grade levels that also provides additional resources, including sample evaluation tools and referrals. ChiArts is about to welcome its third class of freshmen this fall.

But how do these different initiatives intersect to form a strong, coordinated, sustainable arts education system for CPS? How do we collect the power of these and literally hundreds of other arts education efforts to impact every student in the district? How do we advocate for increased resources to ensure that programs are high quality and

that formative, authentic learning exists at all levels throughout the system?

Also, who is the “we?” And how can we strengthen the “we” to achieve all our mutual goals?

I believe arts education is a social justice issue. Access to effective, facilitated creative processes help youth learn about themselves, find their voices and connect more deeply to their peers and communities. Among other things, students learn how to express themselves, work as part of a team and understand different perspectives and cultures. They also develop artistic skills. I think these opportunities should be a part of every child’s education and life experience.

A few years ago, a group of arts education stakeholders from Chicago (including me, other funders, leaders of arts education nonprofits, district staff and others) gathered in Los Angeles to attend a conference that featured information on the processes and outcomes of the Arts for All initiative. Many stakeholders presented on their experiences with the initiative and most approached the work from different perspectives: teaching artist, principal, funder and other roles.

However, in addition to the thoughtful and intentional content and structure of the work, there was a common thread that ran throughout all of the sessions: each presenter would use the word “we” when explaining who was involved in the work. Finally, at a larger session that involved most of the attendees, one of my colleagues from Chicago stood up and asked, “Who is the ‘we’? You all are saying ‘we decided this’ and ‘we imple-



Photo by Charlie Westerman. Courtesy of the Erikson Institute and the Polk Bros. Foundation.

mented that,’ but I’m not sure who the ‘we’ is in these scenarios.”

Our friends from LA actually seemed at a loss for a moment. After a short time, someone from the back of the room answered, “It’s all of us.” By the time we attended this conference, many years into the initiative, the “we” had just been woven into the fabric of the effort. It was no one funder or district staff member or arts educator leading the conversation; they all were. Arts for All, indeed.

Those of us from Chicago looked at each other. This is what was missing at home. A number of exciting, creative ventures were occurring in arts education throughout our city, but we did not have a cohesive community reaching toward the accomplishment of mutual goals.

I began to ask colleagues from other cities engaged in similar initiatives about this collective aspect of their work – shared and distributed leadership – and noticed similar verbiage and, more importantly, a similar feeling that permeated the work. In Dallas, New York, Boston and elsewhere, descriptions of the process were peppered with “we” and “all.”

Around the same time as this conference, the RAND Corporation released a report titled *Revitalizing Arts Educa-*

tion through Community-Wide Coordination, which considered similar arts education initiatives among six cities. This report mentions, “We found little collaborative effort [in Chicago] other than that of a group of foundations supporting the school district’s newly hired [Director, Office of Arts Education]. The city’s many other networks of providers and influencers were involved in their own efforts, but there was little coordination across them.”

This remark really brought it home for us. Although we felt that we were collaborating, we had not achieved the community feeling and sensibility necessary to move our efforts forward.

To take up this challenge, the CAEC launched the Chicago Arts Learning Initiative, also known as CALI. CALI was a community-wide effort bringing together large and small arts and cultural organizations, Chicago schools, the district’s Office of Arts Education and funding organizations. Its goal was to leverage existing assets, including Chicago’s strong community of cultural institutions and the work of hundreds of dedicated arts teachers, to ensure equitable and sustainable access to innovative arts learning for all CPS students.

CALI began by taking stock: it surveyed the arts education community, convened more than 200 individuals through four community forums, and held a daylong retreat of 60 arts and education leaders. Through these efforts, Chicago’s arts education community identified opportunities and gaps to be addressed through increased collaboration and coordination, thus making it possible to improve and expand the delivery of arts education in Chicago.

CALI formed workgroups of teachers, principals, parents, artists, funders and representatives from higher education and cultural organizations to create action plans. The groups developed recommendations on how to identify and fill information gaps, create a stronger network of arts educators, and build the capacity of schools and school leaders. They were able to leverage the CPS Office of Arts Education’s *Chicago Guide for Teaching and Learning in the Arts*, to build a platform for greater coherence and quality in arts education for students.

Finally, the groups were able to articulate a set of shared values and goals for arts education in Chicago, and establish a set of desired outcomes for CALI:

- Increasing information and understanding about the levels and availability of arts education in CPS.
- Creating a strong, evidence-based case and a unified message about the importance of investing in arts learning.
- Establishing effective arts leadership within schools and communities, particularly in areas where students receive little or no arts instruction.
- Identifying, understanding and leveraging models and best practices to promote more effective, innovative arts instruction by well-prepared and empowered educators.
- Pursuing equitable distribution of arts resources and services in schools across the city.

Although we felt
that we were
collaborating,
we had
not achieved the
community feeling
and sensibility
necessary
to move our
efforts forward.

Earlier this year, after a competitive RFP process that was informed by the efforts of our colleagues in other cities (particularly New York, Philadelphia and Dallas), members of the CAEC elected to start a new nonprofit called Ingenuity Incorporated, to continue this community-building effort and implement CALI's recommendations. We are in the initial stages of developing this organization, and are excited by the opportunities. Paul Sznewajs, the former founder and executive director of Snow City Arts Foundation, was chosen to lead Ingenuity. His inspiring approach is twofold – to act as a strong voice for arts education and also to facilitate existing and emerging leaders as they respond to the community's strengths and needs.

I think we continue to build the “we” of this work. One of Ingenuity's primary goals is to further develop the “we” and maintain the momentum generated by CALI. The workgroups from CALI are being reorganized to adjust to an evolving

educational landscape in Chicago while also maintaining the integrity of the community's recommendations. We are attempting to bring more stakeholders to the worktable, especially CPS principals and teachers, district leaders and arts educators from small community-based nonprofits. We are also expanding the “we” through bringing different types of stakeholders to work with us. Youth development specialists, professors, lawyers, engineers, arts fans - to name a few - have places at the table and voices to add to the conversation. And we haven't heard from them yet.

Do “us” and “them” still exist? Yes, and there always will be people who feel they exist outside the “we.” We understand we have to take some responsibility for them and make sure we reduce the barriers to inclusion. We also need to make sure we advance the recommendations from the community.

And I realize, even in writing this article, that we are closer to the “we” than before. And I think it just happened organically. As Rainer Maria Rilke says in *Letters to a Young Poet* (1903):

“[T]ry to love the questions themselves as if they were locked rooms or books written in a very foreign language. Don't search

for the answers, which could not be given to you now, because you would not be able to live them. And the point is to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps then, someday far in the future, you will gradually, without even noticing it, live your way into the answer.”

I think the question changed in Los Angeles and we have lived our way into some answers.

We stand on the shoulders of leaders who have orchestrated these important initiatives, both here in Chicago and across the nation. We listen; we learn from you; we celebrate successes and mourn lost opportunities; we join you in advocating for more federal dollars and attention; and we have fun engaging in meaningful creative and educational experiences along the way.

And we are very grateful. ■

For more information on Ingenuity, Incorporated and the Chicago Arts Learning Initiative, and to become part of the “we,” please visit <http://www.ingenuity-inc.org/Home.html>.

Frank Baiocchi is senior program officer of Polk Bros. Foundation.



Left: Courtesy of ChiArts and the Polk Bros. Foundation. Right: Courtesy of Chicago Arts Partnerships in Education and the Polk Bros. Photos by Charlie Westerman.