



California Arts Education Landscape 2025

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Introduction

California stands at a pivotal moment in the trajectory of arts education. With the passage of the Arts and Music in Schools (AMS) Act in 2022 and ongoing efforts by philanthropic and advocacy organizations to address gaps in access to and participation in high-quality arts education experiences, the state has both a mandate and an opportunity to reimagine what arts learning looks like across its diverse school communities.

In light of this moment, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation commissioned this report to support an evaluation and forthcoming strategy refresh of the Performing Arts Program's Youth Policy and Advocacy substrategy. The Hewlett Foundation envisions a California in which all students have "equitable access to a high-quality arts education" and awards grants in pursuit of that vision. The foundation defines "high-quality" as arts education that is culturally responsive, student-centered, and standards-based.

This report presents a landscape scan of arts education in California in light of the evolving conditions catalyzed by new funding and policy shifts. The findings draw from a document review including research reports, policy documents, and news articles; 21 interviews with Hewlett Foundation grantee partners and field experts;¹ and a March 2025 convening of Hewlett Foundation grantee partners. The report is designed to support funders, advocates, and policymakers as they work to strengthen the conditions for equitable access to a high-quality arts education.

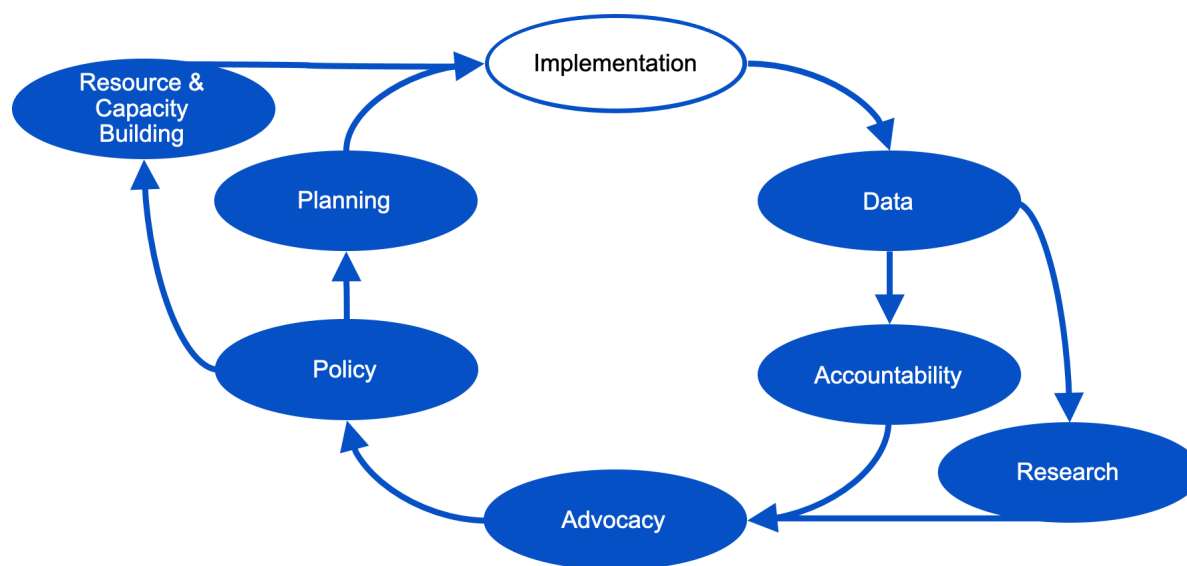
Key questions guiding this scan include:

- Who are the major players influencing arts education in California?
- What are the key levers shaping implementation of high-quality arts education in California?
- How has the AMS Act changed the arts education landscape?
- How does the current reality compare to the Hewlett Foundation's vision for arts education?

¹ Quotes presented in sidebars come from this group of interviewees.

This report organizes findings around seven levers that emerged as central to the **implementation** of arts education in California: **Data, Accountability, Research, Advocacy, Policy, Planning, and Resource & Capacity Building**. Implications specific to the AMS Act are integrated throughout, with callouts highlighting the Act's relevance to each lever.

Levers affecting arts education



The AMS Act


In November 2022, California voters approved Proposition 28, the [Arts and Music in Schools Act](#), setting aside nearly a billion dollars annually for arts education, with more money per student going to schools serving a higher percentage of high-need students (California Department of Education, 2022).

Key stipulations of the AMS Act include:

- **Supplement, not supplant:** Funds must add to existing arts education offerings, not replace them.
- **80/20 rule:** Local education agencies (LEAs) with 500 or more students must use at least 80% of their AMS funds to hire certificated or classified arts instructors; up to 20% may be spent on training, supplies, and partnerships; and only 1% may be spent on administrative expenses.
- **Local control:** Each school must create an AMS Plan outlining the use of funds to be approved by the local school board.
- **Waivers:** LEAs that are unable to meet the Act's requirements, such as hiring sufficient arts teachers, may apply for a waiver through the California Department of Education.
- **Audit oversight:** Compliance is monitored through annual audits that verify whether funds were spent according to the law's requirements.

Throughout the report, additional callout boxes like this one highlight implications of the AMS Act related to each lever.

A brief timeline of key milestones:

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- 1976** The state legislature adds arts course requirements to California's Education Code.
 - 1983** New legislation requires all students to take one year of coursework either in the arts or in a foreign language to graduate from high school.
 - 1999** The University of California (UC) and California State University (CSU) systems adopt a new visual and performing arts requirement, adding one year of arts coursework for admission, beginning with students entering in 2003.
 - 2001** California adopts visual and performing arts content standards for the first time.
 - 2007** The first statewide study of the status of arts education in California commissioned by the Hewlett Foundation, [An Unfinished Canvas](#), is published and highlights gaps in student access between high-poverty and more affluent schools.
 - 2016** Senate Bill 916, the Theatre and Dance Act (TADA), reinstates a single-subject credential for California's theatre and dance teachers.
 - 2019–2020** California adopts the new Arts Education Standards and Framework aligned with National Core Arts Standards.
 - 2022** A second study commissioned by the Hewlett Foundation, [Creativity Challenge](#), documents progress and persistent inequities in access to arts education in the state. A few months later, the AMS Act (Proposition 28) passes, allocating new and ongoing funding for arts education.
 - 2023–2025** Early implementation of AMS Act begins, revealing both momentum and capacity gaps.

Major players in the field of arts education include:

- **National organizations supporting arts education** such as the Arts Education Partnership and the National Guild for Community Arts Education.
- **State organizations governing public education** such as the California Department of Education, the Commission on Teacher Credentialing, and the Governor's Office.
- **State organizations supporting arts education** such as the AME Institute, the California Arts Council, The California Arts Project, and the California County Superintendents' Arts Initiative.
- **Public education organizations** including institutions of higher education (e.g., Center ARTES at California State University San Marcos), county offices of education, districts, and schools, and their leaders and constituents.
- **Philanthropic organizations** including the Hewlett Foundation, Stuart Foundation, and Wallace Foundation.
- **Educational equity organizations** such as the American Civil Liberties Union, Children Now, EdTrust-West, and Public Advocates.
- **Research and reporting organizations** such as EdSource, National Center for Education Statistics, Quadrant, SRI, and WestEd.
- **Membership organizations** such as state, regional, and local parent-teacher associations; the Association of California School Administrators; educator employee associations (e.g., the California Teachers Association); and arts educator associations (e.g., California Music Educators Association).
- **Arts education advocacy groups** such as Create CA, Californians for the Arts at the state level and arts councils (e.g., Arts Council Santa Cruz), nonprofits (e.g., Arts for LA), and community groups at the regional level (e.g., Arts Now communities).
- **Community-based arts organizations and programs** such as Destiny Arts Center, East Bay Center for the Performing Arts, Luna Dance and Creativity, and RYSE Center.

These actors operate across the system, pulling different levers to move the field forward. The following sections explore these levers in depth, highlight where progress is being made, and indicate where further investment or coordination is needed.



Lever: Data

Data systems support the collection, analysis, and sharing of information to inform decisions and evaluate impact. In arts education, robust data is needed to track access, participation, and program quality across schools, regions, and student groups.

Landscape Insights

California lacks a comprehensive, statewide system for tracking access to and participation in arts education. While some data is collected through the California Longitudinal Pupil Achievement Data System (CALPADS), reporting is inconsistent and does not provide a full picture of program availability or student engagement in the arts, especially at the elementary level.

Interviewees emphasized that without consistent, disaggregated data, it is difficult to identify opportunity gaps or assess whether investments like the AMS Act are improving access. For example, enrollment data broken down by student group or region can reveal whether students in rural communities or students with disabilities have the same access to arts courses as their peers. Without systems in place to monitor student access, participation, and program quality, opportunity gaps remain invisible and cannot be addressed effectively.

“We need... data to make progress over time and to make sure that we’re fulfilling... equity goals. Also, much of California voted for [the AMS Act]. We owe them. The government owes some accountability around how it’s spending that money.”

Data also plays a critical role in guiding planning and advocacy. Interviewees described how access to credible, timely data helps make the case for addressing gaps and expanding programming, informs strategic planning, and fosters continuous improvement. The lack of standardized arts education data poses challenges for making informed decisions at local and state levels.

AMS Act

While the AMS Act requires districts to submit annual audit reports documenting compliance, it does not require providing data on student access to arts education or outcomes associated with the use of funds. Interviewees raised concerns that without better access to data, it will be difficult to assess the impact of this historic investment or ensure it is reaching the students and communities who need it most.



Lever: Accountability

Accountability mechanisms ensure transparency, track progress, and reinforce adherence to established expectations or goals—often through consequences or incentives. In arts education, these mechanisms include public reporting and systems that monitor whether districts and schools are addressing uneven access to arts learning opportunities.

Landscape Insights

California currently lacks formal state-level accountability systems specific to arts education. While the Education Code requires that students have access to instruction in four arts disciplines, there is no mechanism to monitor compliance or hold districts accountable for meeting this requirement, creating a disconnect between policy and practice.

Accountability is more than data collection; it involves clearly defined expectations, monitoring mechanisms, and follow-through. In subjects like math and English language arts, accountability systems include performance targets, progress monitoring, public reporting, and consequences for underperformance, including differentiated assistance for districts that don't meet expectations. No comparable infrastructure exists for arts education, which makes it difficult to apply pressure or focus support aimed at ensuring consistency, quality, and equity in implementation.

“There have been numerous conversations that I’ve observed with schools going, ‘Science is on the dashboard now, so we have to do X, Y, Z.’... I think almost every school leader wants to provide more arts... but there’s nothing holding them accountable to it.”

Some interviewees noted that in the absence of formal accountability, the burden falls to local advocates and leaders to drive progress. This reliance on local initiative can perpetuate inequities, as communities with more capacity or stronger advocacy networks are more likely to experience improvements in access to arts education.

AMS Act

Concerns about district misuse of AMS Act funds have surfaced across the state, with educators and advocates pointing to examples of backfilling existing programs rather than expanding access, as the law requires (D’Souza, 2024; Jones, 2024). While annual audits are designed to ensure compliance, including verification of new staff hires, oversight is retrospective. In some cases, vague guidance and fears of legal repercussions have led school leaders to delay implementation or avoid spending AMS funds altogether (Dale, 2024; D’Souza, 2024). In Los Angeles, these tensions have escalated into litigation, with the author of Proposition 28 and others pursuing legal action against the district for alleged noncompliance (D’Souza & Seshadri, 2025). While lawsuits can bring visibility and urgency, interviewees noted that enforcement through litigation places the burden on individuals or advocacy groups and may discourage innovation or risk-taking in implementation.



Lever: Research

Research generates evidence to guide policy and improve practice. In arts education, research plays a central role in demonstrating impact, informing implementation, and identifying gaps that require attention.

Landscape Insights

Research has long played a vital role in advancing arts education in California. Earlier studies such as *An Unfinished Canvas* (Woodworth et al., 2007) helped bring visibility to access, participation, and funding gaps and informed the case for major policy initiatives such as the AMS Act. Interviewees emphasized the continued need for both descriptive and evaluative research to track progress, elevate promising practices, and surface persistent challenges across diverse educational contexts.

“People need exemplary programs to understand what’s possible. They need to see, ‘Here’s a program that’s 2 years out and here’s what they’ve done’ ... [so] you can understand how to get it started in the context in your community.”

Despite notable investments in research, significant gaps in the research landscape remain. There is no statewide research capturing the state of arts education in the post-pandemic context. Similarly, there is no statewide study documenting implementation progress since the AMS Act passed, and little is known about how different communities are experiencing changes on the ground.

Interviewees noted the importance of both quantitative and qualitative research to capture nuanced insights and inform capacity-building efforts. They also noted that research should center the experiences of historically underserved students and provide case studies that reflect the specific opportunities and barriers faced in different types of school communities.

AMS Act

To date, the only study of AMS Act implementation is a regional analysis conducted by Arts for LA, focused on the Los Angeles area (Kunisaki, 2024). Interviewees identified a need for statewide research on how AMS funds are being used and whether they are leading to measurable changes in access, participation, and quality. Interviewees also noted a need for case studies of promising practices and toolkits to help implement them such as [Create CA’s Prop 28: AMS Planning Toolkit](#). Without robust research, it is difficult for the field to learn from early implementation or to support continuous improvement.



Lever: Advocacy

Advocacy involves efforts to influence policy, resource allocation, and public awareness. In the arts education field, advocacy includes efforts to secure funding, elevate the importance of arts education, and advance equity in public discourse and decision-making.

Landscape Insights

Arts education advocacy in California has long focused on building public and political support for state and local policies designed to expand access. With the passage of the AMS Act, the landscape has shifted: Many interviewees describe a transition from advocating for funding to supporting implementation and capacity building, including ensuring that new investments reach underserved students and schools. At the same time, advocates are working to ensure that arts programs remain protected amid shrinking district budgets and the expiration of federal COVID-era relief funds, pressures that have raised concerns about the misuse or redirection of AMS funds (D'Souza, 2024).

Furthermore, interviewees noted that arts education is frequently left out of broader conversations around educational equity. For example, educational equity advocacy organizations rarely discuss access to arts education in their work.

“Virtually all advocates would say, ‘Yes, [the arts are] important.’ But, when they’re asked to prioritize the things that they’re going to fight for, it just barely rises to the top unless they’re an organization specifically focused on the arts.”

AMS Act

The AMS Act has shifted the focus of advocacy in the state. With guaranteed arts funding now in place, advocacy efforts increasingly center on supporting implementation, particularly around building capacity and clarifying expectations.



Lever: Policy

Policies define formal rules and expectations and provide resources and structures that shape practice at the state, district, or school level. In arts education, this includes specifying course requirements via legislation, teacher credentialing requirements, and funding formulas that influence what gets taught, who teaches it, and how it's funded.

Landscape Insights

Arts education in California is shaped by the state Education Code and key resources such as standards and frameworks developed at the behest of the legislature and adopted by the State Board of Education. The California Education Code requires schools to provide access to instruction in four arts disciplines—music, dance, theater, and visual arts—for all students. Yet as of the 2019–20 school year (the most recent year for which statewide data are available), only 11% of schools met that requirement (Woodworth et al., 2022). Likewise, although the state's 2019–2020 update to the Arts Education Standards and Framework marked an important moment in the continued evolution toward standards-based instruction, state policymakers did not provide funding to support the rollout of the new standards and framework (e.g., professional learning infrastructure). Instead, the California County Superintendents' Statewide Arts Initiative led efforts to prepare educators for the transition to the new standards with resources provided in part by the Hewlett Foundation.

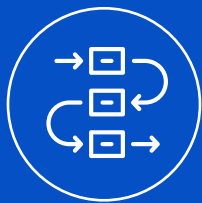
“The support that’s needed [around the new arts standards and framework] ... is twofold: One, get the messaging to administrators and district personnel ... then also, how do we better support teachers ... [in] even ... knowing what the standards [are]?”

State policymakers establish arts teacher credentialing policies that are in turn implemented by the California Commission on Teacher Credentialing. Despite reinstating dance and theatre credentials via legislation passed in 2016, teacher credentialing remains a key area of concern. Interviewees suggested that the policies that govern who is authorized to teach the arts, particularly in elementary settings, may be contributing to workforce shortages and uneven access to qualified arts teachers across the state. Some interviewees pointed to the need for clearer pathways into arts teaching, especially for educators with community-based experience or nontraditional backgrounds, and increased support for prospective arts teachers.

Finally, California's Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) and the AMS Act fund arts instruction, while other funding mechanisms (e.g., state and local voter-approved general obligation bonds) provide the means by which schools can establish equipped, dedicated facilities for arts education. These policies set a strong foundation for arts education, but uneven support for implementation and unclear guidance around newer policies like the AMS Act may limit their impact, especially in communities with fewer resources.

AMS Act

A consistent theme among interviewees was a lack of clarity about how to interpret the AMS Act. Interviewees said district leaders have expressed confusion about what the law allows, what it requires, and how it intersects with existing policies or planning processes. This uncertainty has led to hesitancy or delays in implementation in some communities, particularly those with limited administrative capacity.



Lever: Planning

Planning refers to the development of intentional, strategic approaches that guide investments and implementation. In arts education, planning involves assessing needs (i.e., gaps in access, participation, and quality), engaging community members to help identify priorities, establishing goals and benchmarks, allocating resources, and developing a system for continuous improvement.

Landscape Insights

Strategic planning is a critical lever for advancing arts education in California, but the landscape is fragmented. While the AMS Act requires each school to develop a site-level plan for arts education spending, these plans are minimally defined and not required to align with other local priorities.

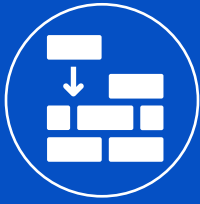
This fragmentation creates an important opportunity. Schools and districts can use the AMS planning process to reinforce and extend goals articulated in broader local processes, such as Local Control and Accountability Plans (LCAPs) and Single Plans for Student Achievement (SPSAs). However, the arts remain inconsistently included in those plans, and meaningful integration is far from universal (Woodworth et al., 2022).

District-level strategic arts plans, though optional, can offer a unifying vision across schools, foster community engagement, and help coordinate the use of new investments. Where these plans are in place, districts may be better positioned to respond quickly and equitably to new opportunities. However, without adequate data, time, and community input, planning may reinforce rather than reduce gaps in access, participation, and quality.

“Districts that had a clear arts education district strategic plan were the first to be able to move on implementation of the AMS Act. That was by far the one indicator of a district that had moved in a positive direction.”

AMS Act

While the AMS Act requires schools to develop site-level plans for arts education spending, it offers little guidance on what those plans should include or how they should be developed. Interviewees emphasized that effective planning must go beyond compliance to reflect meaningful community engagement—particularly by centering student voice. To support this work, some practitioners have turned to [Create CA's Prop 28: AMS Planning Toolkit](#), and many called for additional exemplars that are accessible and relevant across varied school and district contexts.



Lever: Resource & Capacity Building

Resource and capacity building refers to the development of financial, human, and material infrastructure needed to support effective implementation. In arts education, this includes securing sustainable funding, identifying leaders, recruiting and retaining a qualified teacher workforce, and ensuring access to facilities and materials.

Landscape Insights

In California, the infusion of AMS Act funding has dramatically altered the resource landscape for arts education, but capacity challenges persist. While many schools have new funds to expand programs, they often face barriers in hiring qualified arts educators, securing appropriate instructional space, and navigating AMS Act policy. What's more, district-level leadership—such as program coordinators or curriculum specialists—is uneven, with only 25% of rural schools receiving this kind of assistance compared to 58% of schools overall (Woodworth et al., 2022).

Persistent workforce shortages in arts education predate the AMS Act but have become more visible and urgent since its passage (Kunisaki, 2024; Woodworth, 2024). These shortages are not evenly distributed across the state: Rural areas and some urban districts face especially steep challenges in recruiting arts educators. Estimates suggest that more than 5,000 additional arts teachers will be needed to meet demand statewide. At the same time, teacher preparation pipelines remain limited, and districts face recruitment challenges driven by few training programs and limited awareness of job opportunities.

“Folks need to be able to understand, ‘Hey, I’m interested in becoming an arts teacher. How can I easily know what to do and where to go and also get resources to support me to do that?’ ... it’s just too hard to navigate ... unless you’re resourced ... So how do we lessen that barrier?”

Facilities also pose capacity constraints, especially in elementary schools and in schools serving low-income communities (Kunisaki, 2024; Woodworth et al., 2022). Some schools lack appropriate performance spaces or must repurpose shared facilities. Capacity-building efforts that span both infrastructure and human capital are needed to ensure that funding translates into sustainable, high-quality programming.

AMS Act

The AMS Act brings significant new funding to arts education, but it does not address the systemic workforce shortages that limit implementation. Interviewees expressed concern that without targeted investments in recruiting and preparing arts educators, the field may struggle to realize the full promise of the legislation. Some local community members are responding by launching new efforts to strengthen the teacher pipeline, such as partnering with local universities and offering paid residencies to help prospective teachers earn their credentials.

Reflections & Considerations for the Field

California's arts education landscape is evolving rapidly, shaped by new investments, renewed policy attention, and long-standing efforts by advocates and educators. The AMS Act represents a generational opportunity to expand access to arts education, but the Act alone is not enough to guarantee access to, participation in, and quality of arts instruction for all students. This scan has surfaced multiple leverage points, alongside key challenges, that will influence the trajectory of arts education across the state.

While the infusion of funding has been transformative, systems for planning, capacity building, and accountability are uneven. Districts with established infrastructure (i.e., strategic arts plans, dedicated staffing, and strong local partnerships) are better positioned to translate new resources into expanded opportunities for students. Communities without that foundation often face barriers such as workforce shortages, limited planning capacity, or fear of noncompliance.

Across levers, the absence of consistent, disaggregated data and formal accountability mechanisms limits the state's ability to monitor progress, identify gaps, and target support. Without these systems in place, efforts to address disparities in access to, participation in, and quality of arts education opportunities are difficult to track and sustain.

Despite these challenges, California's arts education ecosystem is rich with assets. County offices of education, community-based organizations, research and advocacy groups, and philanthropic partners all play vital roles in supporting districts and schools. Coordinated action across these players, especially efforts that support meaningful local engagement and build capacity in underserved areas, will be critical to ensuring the AMS Act delivers on its promise.

Looking ahead, the field will benefit from continued investment in infrastructure: not just funding for teachers and instructional resources, but support for planning, data systems, and research. These elements form the connective tissue that enables resources to reach the students who need them most—and that makes progress visible, measurable, and sustainable.

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