Recovering Lost Learning Due to COVID 19: Expanding Enrichment Opportunities in an Urban School District

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Abstract
In the midst of the pandemic, this school district made a significant investment with recovery dollars to expand enrichment opportunities in art, music, and physical education for students in their K-8 schools. The hypothesis was increasing the quality and quantity of these opportunities, the school district would increase student engagement, lead to more empathetic and joyful learning environments, and create more time for teacher preparation and collaboration. There were a number of challenges in planning and implementation that district leaders and principals had to overcome in order to see this initiative come to fruition. Early results show some promising trends and anecdotes indicate that students are participating in extracurricular experiences that they never would have been exposed to without these opportunities.

Keywords
leadership, principals, schools, urban education, change

Introduction
In the spring of 2021, my district convened a meeting of two dozen central office personnel, school leaders, union officials, and district leaders to discuss one of

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the “big bets” connected to realizing our learning vision and post-pandemic recovery efforts. The hope was that expanding enrichment opportunities in art, music, and physical education for students in the K-8 schools would increase the quality and quantity of extracurricular offerings which will increase engagement, lead to a more empathetic and joyful learning environment, and create more time for teacher preparation and collaboration. All of this would also allow schools to address the post-pandemic recovery and lost learning time in pursuit of our learning vision. Inherently we understand that art is essential to our lives, and we know that as soon as children’s motor skills are developed, they communicate through artistic means. The arts compel us to empathize with others and to see life and experiences through different lenses. There is research that supports how arts enhance civil society in creating higher levels of civic engagement, higher levels of social tolerance and behavior (Leroux & Bernadska, 2014). However, while we recognize art’s transformative effects, its place in K-12 education is tenuous. Over the past few decades, the number of students enrolled in “arts” programming has been reduced significantly (Nick & Hedberg, 2011). In our case the “big bet” means significantly investing in staffing and transportation which necessitates redesigning schedules, staggering staff start times, and aligning bell schedules all requiring significant coordination.

**District Overview**

My district has approximately 35,500 students being served by 98 schools. The rustbelt city, situated in the Midwest, has an additional 31,000 students who are served by 53 charter schools and 36 non-public schools. Below are the demographics of our district in comparison to the city (Figure 1):

![Figure 1. Comparison Demographics: District vs. City.](image)
The city, which has been losing population since 1940, has the highest child poverty rate in the nation and a historically divided city based on class and race. The city is divided by a river into the east and west sides, with the east being predominantly African American and populated primarily by lower economic individuals where in some east side areas the median income is about one-third of the city’s overall median income (Astolfi, 2021). Adding to the list of challenges, were significant lead levels found in many of the older homes resulting in several health complications (Francis Payne Bolton School of Nursing & Case Western Reserve University, n.d.). The school voucher program began in the 1996 to 1997 school year which contributed to a significant loss of enrollment from 80,000 to its current numbers today of approximately 35,000 students (Hanauer, 2002). The increase of school choice, coupled with a general generational population loss for the city, created a need to change practices. For a long time, my district expected parents to adjust to the needs of the schools their children attended, but with the changes in the educational landscape as well as the demographic population shifts, we realized that we had to adjust our practices to meet the needs of our families. As our district became less diverse, students more likely to be economically disadvantaged, and rates of English as a second language and intervention services increasing, we recognized that we needed to provide more experiences and services for our children. The table below shows the current data (Figure 2):

| Student Demographics                  | District |
|---------------------------------------|----------|
| SPED                                  | 21.2%    |
| Limited English Proficient            | 13.1%    |
| Economically Disadvantage             | 100%     |
| Homeless                              | 4.2%     |
| District Mobility Rate                | 12.1%    |
| Economic Characteristics              |          |
| Children Age 18 under in poverty      | 46.1%    |
| Children Age 5 under in poverty       | 48.7%    |

*Figure 2. District Demographics.*
We added social emotional learning supports in the form of integrated curriculum, replaced in-school suspension rooms with support centers embedded in each school, adopted specific social emotional programs to help teachers and students understand one another, added nurses or health aids to each school, created a student support team dedicated to identifying and assessing supports, and provided wrap-around mental health services for each school. Thanks in part to the pandemic, we added 1:1 technology and other cloud-based learning management tools to offer school staff a new way to personalize learning and differentiate instruction for all students. We overhauled our ELA and math curricula and gave schools the autonomy to select curricula that met the needs of their school’s population. In 1 year alone, a year we appropriately titled the “Year of Disruption,” we implemented 36 initiatives. However, despite adding resources and programs, our district leadership realized we needed a different way thinking.

A Plan in Motion

The result was a multi-faceted plan that created a whole new vision for learning and teaching, a philosophy that was founded on the premise that all students have a high-quality, equitable education in schools that inspire joy in learning. The pandemic obviously created enormous challenges for school districts nationwide as well as worldwide, but it also provided a source of additional dollars in the form of Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund (ESSER Fund). These were federal funds that were designed to assist school districts in purchasing real property and perform construction for improvement to land, buildings, or equipment that meet the overall needs of students. The ESSER funds were funded by the Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act (CRRSA), passed in 2021 that provided $54.3 billion to help states and school districts safely reopen schools, measure and effectively address significant learning loss (Ohio Department of Education, 2021). We received over $220 million in funding that went to immediately aid in technology acquisition, additional staff support, resources and supplies, and additional infrastructure. Despite the challenges of the pandemic, the district was still able to pass the levy renewal in 2020, which in conjunction with federal ESSER funding we were able to add several extracurricular programs that provided our students additional opportunities for engagement, that typically were available to students in wealthier school districts, but seldom in urban districts. This not only aided in meeting our equity mission, but simultaneously provided students with experiences and opportunity’s that reduced the learning gap.
Planning the Investment

One of those extracurricular programs intended to reduce the learning gap was a significant gamble. The “big bet,” as it was coined, was an initial investment of $36 million of ESSER federal dollars, which was intended to add staff, resources, and transportation, which would show the community that the district is committed to addressing all needs of our students. We knew that the funds used were only temporary so this commitment was made knowing that future funding would have to come from different sources or require asking taxpayers to invest further to support the additional investments in extracurricular programing. Specifically, the district was committed to increasing the amount and quality of art, music, physical education, and extracurricular opportunities for all elementary students, both during the regular day and before or after school. Why would we do that? Adding staff on temporary funding was certainly risky, but a recent Brookings study found a substantial increase in arts education experiences has remarkable impacts on students’ academic, social, and emotional outcomes (Kisida & Bowen, 2019). By increasing the quality and quantity of these opportunities we had four goals: increase student engagement, increase opportunities for authentic expression and demonstration of learning, enable more empathetic and joyful learning environments, and create more time for teacher preparation and collaboration. This would ultimately allow schools to address the post-pandemic recovery and lost learning time in pursuit of our learning vision.

There were also other by-products we anticipated would materialize over the next few years such as increasing enrollment by building a “product” that students, parents, and families want. We would also likely have credibility to ask for a property tax increase or renewal because students, parents, and families want to sustain the “product” we built. Finally, the State could potentially increase our revenue allocation through a new funding formula, change to our local school choice program (voucher), continuation of Wellness Funds (State funds for schools who serve large percentage of disadvantaged students), and other vehicles that treat our district fairly and recognize the higher cost to provide world-class education for the State’s most vulnerable and needy students.

While we were aspirational in some of the outcomes, we also recognized that some of the challenges we faced were not as abstract. We acknowledged that it meant schools would have to start band, orchestra, and choir programs at a few schools that had no existing programs currently. We also had to ensure at least one full time staff person per art, music, and physical education at each school and we did this knowing that the newly negotiated labor agreement with the teacher’s union required the district to provide an
additional period per week to perform “non-instructional” duties. Would the “Why” be enough to justify the cost and overcome the challenges? District leaders certainly thought so, but perhaps the most important reason was simply this, our students deserved it. They deserved to have opportunities to perform in an after-school band or choir, to produce sculptures and paintings in an art club, or participate in more inclusive athletic opportunities like volleyball, kickball, or dodgeball. After school gardening clubs, dramatic productions, drum lines, creating digital storybooks, and photography clubs were just a few of the ideas that could engage students in meaningful opportunities that could potentially change their lives.

Large Obstacles

The district formed a representative group of highly respected district leaders comprised of two senior level chiefs, the district arts and PE managers, six principals, two principal supervisors, the transportation and safety and security executive directors, human resources and food services directors, a program manager, and two consultants who were previously engaged in the district’s budget process and were included for alignment purposes. This team’s role was to tackle the logistics and problem solve for implementation and it did not take long for challenges to appear.

One of the largest obstacles that took center stage was transportation. To provide these programs equitably it would require the district to ensure transportation for all students. On the surface that is easy to say, but the reality of scheduling 65 schools all geographically spread out over 82 square miles, coordinating stops, drop off route times, pick up route times, school start and ending times. Complicating factors of planning routes without hard numbers or students identified was mind numbing. It quickly became apparent that every school’s schedule had to be adjusted which was minor for some but major for others. Further complicating matters was the pandemic’s effect on staffing. Finding bus drivers became a significant factor, second only to the teacher and substitute teacher shortages. To accommodate for these challenges, schools had to make sacrifices on their school start and end times. School autonomy, at least when it came to transportation, had to take a hiatus and the transportation director ended up creating a three-tier arrival and departure schedule. Schools either fell into the early-7:00 to 7:35 block, the middle-8:00 to 8:35 block, or late-9:00 to 9:35 block and they could not change it. Transportation also created “hub stops” that efficiently utilized the bus fleet while maximizing the number of students that could be pick up at one location. A “hub stop” was a location that was placed where a significant
portion of students lived within a short walking distance. Schools posted these stops and students wishing to participate could either be picked up or dropped off at that location depending on the school’s AM or PM additional encore period. This added flexibility allowed the transportation department to accommodate those students who did not have access to transportation or who were not close enough to walk to school despite large shortages in bus drivers and substitute drivers.

Another large obstacle was the additional supervisory time for administrators. Typically, a principal’s day begins well before the first bell rings and concludes long after the last student is home. With the addition of the extra-curricular period, principals either had to arrive even earlier or stay much later than what they were used to experiencing. Not only did this add time, but they were ultimately responsible for supervising students in the event that a teacher or teachers were absent. Complicating matters were the lack of substitutes for teachers who called off and being that this extra period was outside of the contractual day for regular teachers, there were no teachers available to take that assignment. This also had an unintended consequence of discouraging principals in recruiting for this program. In some schools, attendance for these programs were low which in part, was a result of the unwanted burden of having to manage a program with staff who were perceived as unreliable. These concerns were real and given the impact school leaders had on recruitment, retention, and ultimately the success of this initiative it was determined that stipends would be added for those principals who participated fully in the extracurricular program.

One other obstacle threatened to significantly hamper the initiative. Some schools had existing band programs, challenge choirs, drama productions, after school clubs, and intramural sports that welcomed the new program as it gave the school leader some much needed flexibility with the contract and provided transportation without direct cost to the school’s budget. However, in schools that did not have any existing programs, some school leaders struggled with the new initiative. In some instances it was a staffing issue either because there literally was no one in the art or music or PE position, or because who they had little ability or desire to create something. Recruitment, communication to parents, and monitoring the various programs had to potential to be seen as added complications to a plate that was already overflowing with Covid related issues. To reduce these stressors, a handbook was developed with tips and suggestions on how to set up these extracurricular programs complete with a list of specific programs for each of the disciplines. A central office director was tasked with overseeing this part of the initiative and offered principals one-on-one assistance in creating, communicating, and
managing the program. Additional professional development was provided for the principals led by principals who had been on the development team to round out the supports that were provided.

**Measuring Success**

By the conclusion of the team’s expected deadline, they delivered an 11-page guidance documenting the “Why” and vision alignment, the program offerings, staffing and scheduling, duties of specific personnel supporting the program, transportation, food services, athletics, and coaching, identifying the investments to improve quality, and attendance tracking. The program was initiated, principals created their schedules to support, teachers planned, and principals and staff recruited students for those new extracurricular programs. As mentioned previously, some schools struggled to get all three art, music, and PE programs up and running, while others experienced immediate success. Schools with existing band programs and choirs jumped on the opportunity to expand rehearsals and those with strong sports programs added more time on the court for conditioning and skills development. Principals were required to submit participation numbers and daily attendance and the Director of Arts Education was tasked to monitor implementation, it became apparent that assessment and monitoring of our investment was lacking. There was discussion early in the planning stages of how to measure progress such as attendance, performances, art production, and to some extent grades and grade point averages (GPA). It was a sizable investment, and senior leadership understood that a tangible mechanism to determine if the dollars were worth the effort had to be created to determine if there was a correlational relationship between some, if not all of these factors. The district’s theory was that students who participated in art, music, and PE enrichment before or after school would be more likely have higher grades, have less absences, fewer tardies, and less likely to receive disciplinary consequences than students who did not participate.

Right now there is a small team collecting attendance information on those students who participated and cross referencing with GPA and testing data. Gathering that data has required our director of the Arts Education to work closely with our data analysis team, which is a task that is time consuming, but ultimately will produce data that can be analyzed and evaluated. We are also identifying suspensions and other disciplinary measures for those students who participated and comparing those results to students who did not participate to measure for any additional correlational evidence. We also have our state assessment, which should be available in the late summer.
Until then, we can look to our anecdotal observations and reports from building leaders who have shared countless examples and stories of students who learned to play a new instrument, performed for the first time on stage in front of friends and family members, learned to play a new sport, or created their very first clay bowl. Certainly, some of the outcomes and benefits from exposure to the arts and PE are not easily measurable such as social and emotional benefits and educational enjoyment. However, we can measure compassion for others, students’ school engagement, college engagement, and their inclinations to draw upon works of art as a means for empathizing with others (Kisida & Bowen, 2019). The true impact may not be seen for many years, but few would argue that producing well-rounded scholars is an effort worth the investment.

Conclusion

I have had the privilege and the disappointment of experiencing many different initiatives, from ones I personally researched, planned, promoted, and implemented to others that had little lasting effects. Regardless of their wide-ranging differences, the one commonality among all of them was the lack of assessing the value of the program. According to the best evidence we have, money spent wisely has a significant impact on positive student outcomes (Baker, 2018). If this is the case, then it is even more imperative to assess this program’s effect. Placing a full-time art, music, and PE teacher at each school is vitally important to schools because of the relationships teachers need to build with students. Engaging students is vitally important for purposes of motivation, creating joy, and creating authentic learning experiences, but it is also equally as important that we know the true measure of this program as we must hold ourselves accountable if we wish to sustain this program for years to come.

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