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Impact Report Covert Art

Dancing in the Library (2024)
A collaborative illustration by three Grade 6 Church Street School students

I. Executive Summary

Higher Order Thinking Schools is a school-wide arts in education program of Arts for Learning Connecticut (AFLCT). HOT Schools was implemented at ten schools across the state during the 2024-2025 academic year, utilizing a variety of arts learning strategies to improve student engagement, enrich school culture, and expand teacher practice.

This report represents a continuation of the partnership between PERG Learning and AFLCT, begun in 2021-22 with a developmental evaluation (available at www.aflct.org/hots). It includes detailed data in the form of survey results and analysis as well as quotes from diverse stakeholders, and focuses on program implementation and impact during the 2024-25 school year.

The review of extensive formative and summative data confirms that the three main goals of HOT Schools—to improve student engagement, enrich school culture, and expand teacher practice—have been met in the 2025 academic year across the ten HOT Schools partner schools. Moreover, it is clear that the core programmatic elements have been implemented with fidelity and creative vigor, and that HOT Schools effectively supported Social and Emotional Learning and Culturally Responsive Teaching for the students, Teaching Artists, and educators who participated in the program.

II. Introduction

Higher Order Thinking Schools was established in 1994 by the Connecticut Office of the Arts (COA) in the state's Department of Economic and Community Development. In 2020 the program transitioned to AFLCT with the support of a multi-year partnership grant from COA.

The HOT Schools program offered in each partner school consists of four components that make up what is considered a continuum of practice: arts access, arts connections, and arts integration.

- Arts Integrated Residencies (AIRs) extended learning experiences co-taught by Teaching Artists and certified classroom teachers, integrating ideas and/or concepts between arts disciplines and curricular content
- Arts Workshops (AWs) one day in class creative experiences that engage students in the creation of artistic work in the context of content area learning
- School-Wide Performances (SWiPs) assembly style performances, reaching all students and faculty
- Professional Development (PD) learning opportunities for teachers and Teaching Artists in Culturally Responsive Teaching, Social Emotional Learning, Multiple Intelligences Theory, and other pertinent pedagogies

In addition to the program elements outlined above, each school participates in overall planning with school leaders and a support team anchored by the HOT Schools Site Coordinator. Teachers and administrators also attend the HOT Schools Summer Gathering, a full-day participatory event during which the accomplishments of the year are celebrated, stories are shared, and teachers and school leaders convene for a Keynote Address, and Professional Development led by Teaching Artists.

The program has three desired outcomes, each of which will be explored in detail, below: Improve Student Engagement, Enrich School Culture, and Expand Teacher Practice.

During school year 2024-25, there were 10 HOT Schools partner schools across the state, with varying histories in the program.

- Church Street School, Hamden, grades PK-6, 277 students (5th year)
- Ashford School, Ashford, grades PK-8, 367 students (5th year)
- F. J. Kingsbury School, Waterbury, grades K-5, 439 students (4th year)
- Roxbury Elementary School, Stamford, grades K-5, 562 students (3rd year)
- Concord Magnet School, Norwalk, grades K-8, 320 students (3rd year)
- Regional Multicultural Magnet School, New London, grades K-5, 501 students (3rd year)
- ACES Wintergreen Interdistrict Magnet School, Hamden, grades K-8, 467 students (2nd year)
- Wolfpit Integrated Arts School, Norwalk, grades PK-6, 361 students (2nd year)
- Reed Elementary School, Waterbury, grades PK-8, 460 students (1st year)
- RJ Kinsella Magnet School of Performing Arts, Hartford, grades PK-8, 436 students (1st year)

III. Research Methods

PERG Learning was contracted through Director & Senior Researcher Elizabeth Osche in Spring 2025 to collaborate with AFLCT staff in creating the 2024-25 annual impact report for the program. The R&E team consists of HOT Schools Director (Christopher Eaves) and AFLCT Executive Director (John-Michael Parker). The R&E team and their research partner worked collaboratively to collect, organize, manage and analyze data about all four components of the program to shape this summative report that documents the impact of the program in the HOT Schools partner schools during academic year 2024-25.

HOT Schools engages in formative evaluation research throughout the year to maintain program quality and contribute to program improvement. In addition to the formative evaluation surveys, the program also includes end-of-year surveys of students, teachers and school leaders. These surveys, along with online focus group interviews (conducted, transcribed, and analyzed by Elizabeth), formed the basis for this comprehensive assessment of impact of the HOT Schools program.

IV. Data Analysis

Goal 1: Improve Student Engagement

What this looks like:

- Students actively participate in their learning
- Students develop and demonstrate Social and Emotional Learning skills of self-awareness, social awareness, and relationship skills
- Students express themselves creatively and in ways that are culturally relevant to them

All HOT Schools programming is designed to be interactive and engaging. That is, students and teachers in the Arts Workshops, the Arts Integrated Residencies, School-Wide Performances and Professional Development actively engage with the arts, the content areas, and with each other. HOT Schools' strategies provide multiple entry points for engagement, often involve movement, emphasize teamwork and collaboration, and quickly engage students of all learning styles. As can be seen on year-end surveys, **98% of HOT Schools teachers feel their students were actively engaged** in learning this year. That number rises to 100% when referring specifically to those participating in Arts Integrated Residencies. All school leaders also agreed that their students were "somewhat" or "very" engaged in learning this year.

According to students who completed end-of-year surveys, 88% said that they participated "all the time" or "often" in school this year, and 85% "agreed" or "strongly agreed" that their participation mattered.

Engagement - End-of-Year Aggregated Survey Responses

How often did you participate at school this year? (Students, n=730)*	88%	
Do you feel that your participation mattered at school this year? (Students, n=730)**	85%	

Were your students actively engaged in their learning this year? (Teachers, n=102)***	98%
Were your students actively engaged in their learning this year? (School Leaders,	100%
n=14)***	

^{*}All the time/Often; **A lot/A little; ***Somewhat/Very

In addition to the survey responses, teachers and school leaders were asked during focus groups to describe particular moments where students were engaged this year. Teachers talked about how integrated learning made the content more accessible to their students, particularly those who are sometimes less engaged.

We were learning about the slave trade and I feel like [the residency] made it just that much more accessible to the fifth graders, and really put it on their level. They were able to learn about it artistically through theater, map making, and writing. So I feel like it took what could be a very, very touchy subject and really made it super accessible for everybody involved.

—HOT Schools Teacher Focus Group

This little boy who's in my class; for the first few weeks of school, I barely heard him talk. He stood up [during an activity in the residency] and he took on a leadership role. And I'm not sure I would have seen that if it weren't for that opportunity. So for student engagement, I just felt like there was a little bit of something for everybody, which was really cool to see.

—HOT Schools Teacher Focus Group

I felt at the end of this residency that students were more connected. It was very, very positive and surprising to see how they were all interacting and how engaged they were, what it brought out of them, and just seeing them open up and really participate.

—HOT Schools Teacher Focus Group

Teachers also saw first hand how creative their students could be when given a safe and welcoming opportunity to express themselves through the arts. The work of the HOT Schools staff and Teaching Artists to create a brave, safe, and student-centered space allows students to take creative risks with opportunities to express their own ideas, cultures and identities, as well as to engage with the academic content in unique and meaningful ways. When students feel comfortable in the environment and are allowed to take risks, their creativity blossoms.

Creative Expression - Survey Responses

Do you now feel more confident in your own creativity? (EOY Students n=730)*	86%
In this Arts Integrated Residency, did you have the opportunity to express yourself creatively? (AIR Students n=474)**	90%
How well was your students' creative expression supported this year? (EOY Teachers N=102)***	94%

^{*}Much more/a little more; **Often/sometimes; ***Strongly/a little

[Through HOT Schools I learned] what risk takers students are when they have creative expression and ownership of their writing. Every single 3rd grader shared their poem at the

final AIR session. It was wonderful to see.

–HOT Schools Teacher Survey

Students love to express themselves creatively especially when you don't give much direction. They can absolutely step up to the plate if given the environment to do so.

—HOT Schools Teacher Survey

A student survey prompt asked them to: "please share something you learned about yourself this year". Countless responses described students realizing something about their own creative expression:

"I learned that my classmates are creative and that I am more creative than I thought I was."

—Student, AIR Survey

Goal 2: Enrich School Culture

What this looks like:

- A strong community that joins together for common experiences and encourages creative self-expression
- A shared sense of identity that fosters belonging for all members of the school community—including students, faculty, and families
- Activities that encourage student voice, choice, participation, and responsibility

HOT Schools provides opportunities for shared artistic experiences through small group work, classroom experiences, professional development, and whole school performances. When a school community engages in a common creative experience that stimulates the senses and promotes shared joy, individuals form connections that promote a stronger and more connected school culture. As one student exclaimed:

Was this HOTS program meant to show people how to connect with each other without directly saying it?

-HOT Schools Student Survey

Results from teacher and school leader surveys indicate that the vast majority felt connections strengthening within their school community over the course of the year with HOT Schools.

Connection - End-of-Year Aggregated Survey Responses

Was there an increase in a sense of connection and/or belonging among your school	87%
community this year? (Teachers, n=102)*	

Was there an increase in a sense of connection and/or belonging among your school	93%
community this year? (School leaders, n=14)*	
To what extent did this PD create an increased sense of connection with your peers?	
(Teachers, n=465)*	96%

^{*}Strong/Somewhat Increased

One teacher described a breakthrough moment for her during a school-wide performance:

The music was so amazing that I had to dance, and the kids started dancing. And I have to tell you, a sense of community, that's what we were feeling when Boogie Chillin was playing. I would love to have more of that, because it was a fantastic time getting to dance with the kids, being carefree, not caring if anybody laughed, we're just all enjoying it. It was actually one of my best days.

-HOT Schools Teacher Focus Group

Other teachers described how they see arts integration as a way to better connect with students in their classroom:

I have learned that incorporating art integration strategies into my day helps me build a stronger connection with my students. They love expressing themselves and working together!

—HOT Schools Teacher Survey

This impact isn't only apparent among students or between students and their teachers, however. The feeling permeates the staff as well. As shown in the table above, 96% of teachers reported feeling more connected to their peers after a HOT Schools professional development workshop. Teachers described how HOT Schools PD was applicable to all staff, which was a rare occurrence:

During the HOT Schools PD it was nice to be with colleagues and to learn about things like multicultural teaching, or multiple intelligences. It was nice to do it through arts, because we have teachers ranging from preschool through eighth grade, so often we don't teach things in common but it was PD that could speak to everyone. So it gave us a common language; a common experience.

-HOT Schools Teacher Focus Group

The work of the HOT Schools Teaching Artists also facilitates Social Emotional Learning (SEL), which is essential for forming meaningful connections that contribute to positive school culture. A school of students and teachers who excel at self-awareness, relationship building, empathy for others, and the ability to understand others' perspective is more likely to become one where all individuals feel they belong. Surveys show that over 90% of responding students worked collaboratively with their peers, and felt they better understood their peers after the experience. Teachers and school leaders overwhelmingly agree that students' Social Emotional Learning was supported this year by HOT Schools.

Social Emotional Learning - End of Year Aggregated Survey Responses

Ho	How well was your students' Social Emotional Learning (self-awareness, social awareness,	100%	
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and relationship skills) supported this year? (EOY, School Leaders, n=14)*	
Do you now better understand your classmates? (EOY, Students, n=730)**	91%
Did you work collaboratively with your classmates? (EOY, Students, n=730)***	91%
How well was your students' Social Emotional Learning (self-awareness, social awareness, and relationship skills) supported this year? (EOY, Teachers, n=102)*	93%

^{**}Much better/a little better; ***Sometimes/often; *Strongly/A little

I notice the impact [of HOT Schools] most in social emotional learning and bringing connection within the classroom, creating more of a community, giving opportunities to children who maybe struggle in other parts of their daily life at school, particularly those that maybe struggle academically or our second language population. Many kids will speak up or participate in ways that we don't typically see in the regular classroom. It gives them a different opportunity, a different way to shine, or a different way to show some of their knowledge, which is always really, really awesome to see.

-HOT Schools School Leader

HOT Schools activities often involve students working in groups, which requires students to collaborate and communicate with peers that they may not often work with. Explorations during AIRs often involve students incorporating a view of the world through the perspectives of others. As an example, first graders at one school were working on descriptive writing, which requires the exploring of emotions. As described by their teacher:

We talked about characters. We talked about how they're feeling and what does that look like? Somebody would stand up and show what it looked like to be sad. Then they would talk about other words and get up and act those out. So that really helped with their writing process because they were able to describe, "their shoulders are hunched over. Their mouth is going down, their eyes are closing, or their head is down". So they described exactly what they were seeing, which was huge for first graders, and then we tied it into, how can we put it into their writing?

-HOT Schools Teacher Focus Group

A fifth grade class learning about American colonies was asked to write a screenplay about the living during that time:

They had to really step into the shoes of these colonists and think about 'what does it mean that we had a bad winter and that we didn't have a good harvest? How is that going to impact us down the road? How would that make us feel?' And they had to write characters that are going through this and problem solving through these real world examples. And they couldn't do that without actually putting themselves there and thinking about, well, how would this affect these people? What must it have been like? They also had to do this in groups so they had to bounce ideas off of each other and collaborate. And a lot of times they were collaborating and working with kids that they don't normally work with.

-HOT Schools Teacher Focus Group

Students in HOT Schools partner schools are entering into learning opportunities that will enhance their sense of identity within a larger community through shared experiences and an emphasis on understanding of how others might experience the world. This expands throughout the school as teachers also engage in shared experiences during professional development as well as with their students through workshops or residencies. The whole school has similar opportunities to engage together during school-wide performances. Each of these elements provides experiences at different scales that promote connection, a sense of belonging, and a supportive and positive school culture.

Goal 3: Expand Teacher Practice

What this looks like:

- Teachers gain new skills and strategies to better engage and teach their students, with a specific focus on Culturally Responsive Teaching, Multiple Intelligences Theory, and Social and Emotional Learning
- Teachers develop leadership through which they encourage and support the growth of their peers
- Teachers understand and practice the alignment, connection, and intersection of arts and non-arts standards

Classroom teachers participate in HOT Schools through professional development; moreover, they learn about arts integration first-hand through planning meetings with Teaching Artists as well as through engagement in the classroom with TAs and students during workshops and residencies. They experience the sense of community and wonder alongside students during school-wide performances. Classroom teachers are instrumental to the implementation of HOT Schools, both during programming, as well as before and after work with TAs.

Teachers shared overwhelmingly positive feedback about HOT Schools professional development. Almost all (95%) of participating teachers rate the quality of HOT Schools PD as "high" or "very high".

- 98% of teachers indicate that PD "very" or "somewhat" effectively **utilized hands-on and** interactive activities.
- All teachers indicate on surveys that PD facilitators were "somewhat" (8%) or "very" (92%) responsive to participant needs during the workshop.

Every single time I get something that I can use in my class, every single time I feel a little bit more confident to try something, artistic, or something new or something different.

—Teacher Focus Group

Throughout the year, various culminating surveys asked teachers: *Have you learned new strategies, skills, and/or ideas that you will use in your teaching in the future?* Most teachers reported learning "some" or "many" new strategies and skills that they can use in their teaching in the future.

Post - Arts Integrated Residency Survey (Teachers, n=35)	89%
Post - Arts Workshop Survey (Teachers, n=127)	91%
Post - Professional Development Survey (Teachers, n=465)	89%
End-of-year Survey (Teachers, n=102)	86%
End-of-year Survey (School Leaders, n=14)	100%

Percentage who responded, "I learned some...." or "I learned many..."

In surveys and focus groups, teachers described ideas and insights for use in the classroom that they have gained through their experience with HOT Schools. The strategies mentioned are often described as useful for keeping more students engaged, fostering social emotional skills through creativity and flexible thinking, and promoting play and joy in the classroom.

Allowing students to talk more openly about their fears/emotions in a group setting [is something I will do more]. I can also be vulnerable with them and share my emotions. This will allow our students to see that it is okay to feel negative emotions sometimes and even adults may feel them.

-HOT Schools Teacher Focus Group

Integrating more artistic expression into literature lessons [is something I took away from HOT Schools]. For instance, using dance and puppetry to analyze themes in literature to make classes more engaging.

-HOT Schools Teacher Focus Group

As the music teacher, [watching the TA] inspired me to think more on my feet in the classroom and it gave me more confidence to experiment in my classroom.

-HOT Schools Teacher Focus Group

Teaching with puppets is something that I incorporate in language learning, and it worked really well in my classrooms, whether it's pretend play, whether they're practicing with the puppets, creating puppets that relate to the language and the culture. So I've used them in different ways, and I always learn something new from every workshop, residency or PD that I attend.

-HOT Schools Teacher Focus Group

Teachers who participated in AIRs reported a better understanding of arts integration, and through PD, most felt that their own creativity was encouraged.

Various Surveys, Teachers

AIR • Teacher	How well do you now understand arts integration (the alignment,	100%
(n=35)	connection, and intersection of arts and non-arts standards)?	
PD • Teacher	To what extent did this PD encourage creativity in teaching and learning?	98%
(n=465)		

Percentage who responded, "Well / Very Well" or "It somewhat/strongly encouraged"
Being part of a HOT School partner school taught me that I'm capable of thinking more deeply
and creatively than I realized. It made me appreciate that learning isn't just about getting

things right, but about exploring different perspectives and growing together.

—Teacher, EOY Survey

HOT Schools really put an emphasis on teachers being designers and thinking creatively. So doing those projects where we can do things a bit differently and have the support of teaching artists and just the support of the structure. We are a HOT School, so it makes sense that we're doing it in a different way.

-School Leader Focus Group

As mentioned earlier, HOT Schools gives teachers a chance to work together creatively as peers, enhancing their community of educators through a common experience—which can then permeate through to the students and the overall school culture.

I loved how the presenter was very encouraging to us from the get-go, and throughout the PD tried to not only make connections with us but also help us make connections with each other. That is exactly the kind of thing we need to keep alive in our practice as teachers.

—Teacher, PD Exit Survey

V. Discussion

Teaching Artists: What Makes Higher Order Thinking Schools Unique

The desired outcomes of HOT Schools—to improve student engagement, enrich school culture, and expand teacher practice—are attainable through mutually-reinforcing programmatic components and mindset shifts among teachers, administrators, and students. This is not, however, a quick or simple process that reaches full potential in a school just by their participation in the program. For some schools, such as those who are new to the program or who have recently undergone a transition in administration, fully embracing the HOT Schools vision and practices take repeated engagement and time to be fully realized. Each year, only some grade levels can host an AIR, which is the most immersive HOT Schools component. As a school participates over time, more teachers are able to host Teaching Artists in their classrooms, learn from the professional development, and witness first-hand the impact that arts integration through HOT Schools can have on their teaching, students, and school community. The Teaching Artists are central in all of these experiences.

During focus groups with Teaching Artists, a discussion about logistics and planning quickly turned to sharing experiences within schools or classrooms that didn't fully engage in the planning and classroom processes. This lack of engagement happened for a variety of reasons, some of which were not under the control of individual teachers or the HOT Schools staff. However, when a host classroom teacher is unable to engage in planning with a Teaching Artist, or does so on a superficial level, it is hard for TAs to plan and execute as deeply as they would wish. Starting with the planning for a residency or workshop, TAs form relationships with teachers, learn about the needs of the classroom they will be working with, identify the content teachers wish to cover, and then spend time carefully planning a bespoke experience for their visit. This collaboration and planning in advance,

along with teachers' engagement to co-facilitate the visit, are necessary to engage students fully and achieve maximum impact. As one TA described: "I'm always thinking of collaboration, cooperation, communication and community building when planning a visit."

Another key to success is enrolling and encouraging the support of school (and sometimes district) administrators. As the leaders of a school building, administrators are essential in facilitating staff engagement with HOT Schools, and creating the context for teachers to be able to take creative risks with their students. As described in an article by the Kennedy Center: "The leaders and administrators of any school hold the key to unlocking change. It is the leader's job to authorize change and remove any fear the staff may have of trying new things. Without authorization from leadership, faculty are often reluctant to go off script. Furthermore, leaders must embody the culture of change through personal risk." This is an especially important step for schools that are new to the cohort, or for principals who are new to a school. These communities in particular need to purposefully create trust between administration and staff, and begin to nurture a culture that is open to the deep work of arts integration that HOT Schools provides.

Celebrations and Challenges in 2024-25

The HOT Schools staff collects survey data from schools throughout the year as part of their evaluation and reflection process. This data is reviewed and actionable, aligned suggestions from stakeholders are often incorporated as feasible. During an evaluation interview, HOT Schools leadership indicated that the consistent positive feedback from students, teachers, and school leaders throughout the year let them know in real time that they were making a positive impact with engaging and meaningful programming.

At the end of the school year, HOT Schools invites participants from the cohort to the Summer Gathering; a day of celebration, connection and learning. During this day, students perform, teachers and school leaders have the chance to reflect and learn through hands-on sessions, and parents are able to join the community and see exactly what HOT Schools is all about.

Other unique and creative shifts took place this year in response to school needs and contexts. As some schools have more challenging contexts than others, and differing levels of experience with HOT Schools, the staff thought creatively and responsively about how to best support those that need it. This year, a school interested in joining the cohort visited a "spotlight" school to learn more about HOT Schools, how it impacts their students and staff, and what is necessary to engage in the program. This successful event prompted HOT Schools staff to consider more ways for schools to learn from one another in the future.

The HOT Schools staff is constantly reflecting on their own experiences, as well as feedback from schools and teaching artists, to shift and meet the needs of the cohort. This year a school requested time for teachers and Teaching Artists to work together during a PD to plan, and this turned into a new professional development offering. As there has been substantial reflection about cultural shifts in Higher Order Thinking Schools partner schools as they participate over time, the staff are reintroducing a PD that focuses on practices and mindsets that would help teachers further embrace HOT Schools best practices.

Although it was clearly another successful year for HOT Schools, new challenges have surfaced as funding in the arts and education has been reduced and become less reliable. Arts for Learning Connecticut has had to reduce staff committed to HOT Schools in order to account for these cuts, and will likely enroll a smaller cohort of schools next year. That said, they are committed to providing high-quality programming, especially to schools who are ready to fully engage. Depending on investments available from each school or district, participating schools may have a reduced set of programming. Ultimately, the responsive nature of the program's design, and the ongoing investment in nurturing school-based leadership and cultural change, should help HOT Schools navigate this uncertain period, and continue its multi-decade legacy of impact.

Conclusion

Data collected this year demonstrates that HOT Schools has once again achieved its stated goals during the 2024-2025 school year. It also shows that over the last four years, there has been a steady impact through both individual programmatic components and schoolwide participation. Over time, surveys consistently show that teachers, students, and administrators overwhelmingly feel as if students have been highly engaged, school culture has been enhanced, and teacher practice has expanded.

An overwhelming majority of teachers, school leaders, and students rate the impact and experience of HOT Schools highly each year. This year's statistics were no different:

- 98% of teachers say their students were actively engaged
- 94% of teachers say that their students' creative expression was supported
- 95% of teachers rate the quality of HOT Schools PD highly
- 91% of students say they better understand their classmates

Integral to this success is the role of the Teaching Artists and HOT Schools staff, who conscientiously and creatively approach each school, residency, workshop, and professional development in order to maximize the impact on students and teachers alike. This achievement results from a long-term commitment to:

- mindful and collaborative planning prior to engaging a school community
- fostering a safe environment of collaboration, connection and trust
- encouraging student voices (and thus their cultures and identities) to direct the learning
- integrating the arts into the classroom in ways that promote creativity and meaningful learning
- engaging flexibly and responsively with students and teachers
- inspiring students and teachers to bring their collective and individual identities to the classroom
- providing immersive, authentic, hands-on creative experiences for all
- promoting a delight in and passion for learning

The above practices that are utilized by HOT Schools align with findings from a literature review published in the International Journal of Education & the Arts; "Arts integration builds greater understanding across disciplines, supporting authentic experiences that engage and motivate

learners. This practice provides multiple modes of learning and understanding, while also fostering imagination, creativity and personal interpretation of ideas and topics." This is especially important as research has shown that after Kindergarten, elementary students' opportunities to engage with the arts in school decreases greatly.

While the context of education is ever-changing, and challenges will always present themselves, HOT Schools is committed to continuing to provide high-quality arts integrated opportunities for learning, collaboration, joy, and community building.

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¹ Zana-Sternfeld G., Israeli, R., & Lapidot-Lefer, N. (2024)

² NEA (2023)