
HIGHER ORDER THINKING SCHOOLS™
Annual Impact Report
Academic Year 2025–26
Arts for Learning Connecticut
Affiliated with the national Young Audiences Arts for Learning network
PERG LEARNING

Outline

I. Executive Summary

II. Introduction

    Research Methods

III. Setting The Stage—Leaders in HOT Schools

IV. Goal: Expand Teacher Practice

    How Administrators Promote Teacher Practice in HOT Schools

V. Goal: Improve Student Engagement

    How Administrators Promote Increased Student Engagement

VI. Goal: Enrich School Culture

    How School Leaders Promote a Strong School Culture

VII. Conclusion

    How Leaders Contribute

VIII. References

Higher Order Thinking Schools

Christopher Eaves, Director

Arts for Learning Connecticut

John-Michael Parker, Executive Director

PERG Learning

Elizabeth Osche, Director

Impact Report Cover Art

Yoruba Adire cloth-inspired textile patterns on paper *c*reated by Grade 5 and Grade 6 students at Regional Multicultural Magnet School as part of a HOT Schools Arts Integrated Residency (AIR) co-designed and co-faciliated with Teaching Artists Tom Lee and Faustin Adeniran. *(2025)*

I. Executive Summary

Higher Order Thinking Schools is a school-wide arts in education program of Arts for Learning Connecticut (AFLCT). During the 2025–26 academic year, HOT Schools partnered with eight Connecticut schools to improve student engagement, enrich school culture, and expand teacher practice through Arts Integrated Residencies, Arts Workshops, School-Wide Performances, and Professional Development.

This report continues the evaluation partnership between PERG Learning and AFLCT, which began in 2021–22 with a developmental evaluation. Drawing on surveys from students, teachers, and school leaders, along with in-depth administrator interviews, it examines program implementation and outcomes during the 2025–26 school year. This year's report gives particular attention to how school leadership supports HOT Schools and extends its influence into everyday teaching and school culture.

Findings indicate that HOT Schools is advancing its three core goals. Among Professional Development survey responses, 96% indicated that educators gained new teaching skills, strategies, or ideas. On end-of-year surveys, 95% of responding teachers reported active student engagement, and 85% reported increased connection or belonging within their school community. Administrator interviews illustrate how leaders sustain this work by participating alongside faculty, protecting collaboration time, and encouraging creative instructional risks. Together, the findings highlight how this support helps embed the arts in everyday teaching and learning.

II. Introduction

Higher Order Thinking (HOT) 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 Arts for Learning Connecticut (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 connection, and arts integration.

- Arts Integrated Residencies (AIRs)—extended learning experiences co-taught by Teaching Artists (TAs) 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 TAs 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. The gathering also includes Professional Development led by TAs.

HOT Schools has three desired outcomes, which are discussed in detail throughout the report: Improve Student Engagement, Enrich School Culture, and Expand Teacher Practice. Each year, the HOT Schools Director provides a theme for the upcoming year, which is introduced at the Summer Gathering prior to that year. For the 2025–26 year, the theme was Arts Education and Citizenship: elevating student voice and democratic practice through which students can develop their roles as active citizens in their classrooms and communities.

During the 2025–26 school year, there were eight HOT Schools partner schools across the state, with varying histories in the program.

- ACES Wintergreen Interdistrict Magnet School
- Concord Magnet School K-8
- F. J. Kingsbury Elementary School
- Jonathan E. Reed PreK-8 School
- R. J. Kinsella Magnet School of Performing Arts
- Regional Multicultural Magnet School
- Roxbury Elementary School
- Wolfpit Integrated Arts School

Research Methods

PERG Learning, an independent program evaluation and research firm, has contracted with AFLCT to collaborate on the evaluation of HOT Schools. The research and evaluation team consisted of HOT Schools Director (Christopher Eaves) and AFLCT Executive Director (John-Michael Parker), along with Elizabeth Osche,

Principal Consultant at PERG Learning. The team worked together 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 2025–2026.

HOT Schools engages in formative evaluation research throughout the year to maintain program quality and contribute to program improvement. Evaluation surveys were collected throughout the school year after specific programming (AIRs, AWs, PD) as well as at the end of the year from teachers, students, and school leaders.

This year, the evaluation also investigated the role of school-level leadership in participating schools. To do this, PERG Learning recruited Principals and Assistant Principals from each school to participate in an in-depth interview, with the intention of talking to at least one administrator from each school. These interviews, along with the survey data, formed the basis for this comprehensive assessment of the impact of the HOT Schools program. This report reviews the impact data and outlines how administrators' commitment to the program contributes to meeting the goals: expanding teacher practice, deepening student engagement, and ultimately transforming episodic programming into a lasting culture of arts integration.

III. Setting the Stage: Leaders in HOT Schools

As the leaders of a school, administrators are responsible for everything that goes on in the building, from curriculum and pedagogy to teacher development: from student engagement to managing district and state requirements. As leaders of a Higher Order Thinking School, principals also oversee program logistics, align programming with the curriculum, promote teacher innovation and creativity, and work towards creating a school identity based on creativity and expression. How each principal achieves these important goals varies by school and by the administrative team supporting them.

As described by Bower & Moctezuma (n.d.) in an article published 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."*

Interviews revealed a common theme across participating administrators: successful implementation of HOT Schools requires deep personal alignment with progressive pedagogy, interdisciplinary learning, and student-centered instruction. While some schools already have these values embedded in their missions and cultures, other schools are more traditionally oriented, and thus the approach of HOT Schools is new to many teachers and administrators.

> *For [success in] HOT Schools, it has to be part of your core beliefs. You have to believe in it.*
> *—HOT Schools Principal*

Principals (and/or their schools) who were newer to HOT Schools described intentional work to get up to speed with the tenets of the program. This included one-on-one meetings with the HOT Schools director, a review of program materials and documentation, and peer learning through visiting existing HOT Schools and talking with administrators who have been part of the program for a long time. It also included attendance at the HOT Schools Summer Gathering, a day-long event of learning, celebration and community.

I believe in interdisciplinary learning and culturally responsive teaching and learning engagement; making sure that kids have real world application of what they're doing. So, for me, it was a welcoming idea to have [HOT Schools] for our kids because at the end of the day, it's not about just content, content, content. What's the application? How can they see it and express themselves through different avenues? So that was a good thing for me to actually come in and embrace [the program]. —HOT Schools Principal

IV. Goal: Expand Teacher Practice

Expanding teacher practice is one of HOT Schools' three core goals. Teachers in HOT Schools are simultaneously learners and teachers. They participate in HOT Schools Professional Development with TAs, and they also learn first-hand about integrating the arts through co-planning meetings with TAs and during classroom experiences with TAs during AWs and AIRs. They then carry these practices into their classrooms long after the TAs move on.

When successful, expanding teacher practice looks like:

- 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
- 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

Teacher surveys indicate that participation in HOT Schools has a considerable impact on their practice. Exit surveys after HOT Schools Professional Development provide overwhelming evidence of the impact these sessions have on teacher learning. Of the 395 surveys returned after 15 different PD sessions, teachers reported that the PD was high quality (98%), engaging (99%), and facilitated by responsive and knowledgeable facilitators (100%). Respondents described the topics as relevant (96%) and reported that the PD encouraged creativity in teaching (98%) and provided new teaching skills and strategies (96%).

Survey Question – End of PD Sessions (n=395)	%
a. How would you describe the quality of this PD?	**98%**
b. How effectively did this PD utilize hands-on activities and/or interactive opportunities?	**99%**
c. How responsive was the facilitator to participant needs and questions?	**100%**
d. How relevant were the content and ideas raised by this PD?	**96%**
e. To what extent did this PD encourage creativity in teaching and learning?	**98%**
f. Have you learned new strategies, skills, and/or ideas that you will use in your teaching in the future?	**96%**

% responding high/very high; somewhat/very

Short open-ended questions asked teachers what ideas they gained from the PD and how they might incorporate these ideas into their teaching. Roughly 90% of surveys included a response to at least one of the above questions. While many responses were brief others included more detail, and they fell into a consistent pattern. Teachers took away ideas around incorporating movement into the classroom through play, exploration, drama, music, dancing, and other avenues. They also gained ideas around relationship building and

collaboration, a greater understanding of student learning styles, as well as specific ideas for classroom activities. Some responses that incorporate multiple themes include:

One new thing I will add to my teaching practice is…

> *I would like to add movement activities to learn vocabulary words. For example, the principles of design (variety, repetition, rhythm) are all concepts that have visual expressions, but may be hard to understand that way. Perhaps inviting the students to create movements for them could help them understand.*

One idea I leave this PD with is…

> *Students AND teachers need to take the time to freely create. It doesn't always have to tie directly into the curriculum.*

In addition to those who participate in the HOT Schools PD, many teachers experience Arts Workshops (AWs), and/or have the chance to host a TA for an Arts Integrated Residency (AIR). Of the 21 teachers who participated in AIRs and returned post-residency surveys, 100% of them indicate that they have learned new strategies and skills for teaching, and 100% describe a greater understanding of arts integration.

Survey Question (Timing)	%
Have you learned new strategies, skills, and/or ideas that you will use in your teaching in the future? (Teachers – AIR Exit Survey, n=21)	**100%**
How well do you now understand arts integration (the alignment, connection, and intersection of arts and non-arts standards)? (Teachers – AIR Exit Survey, n=21)	**100%**
Have you learned new strategies, skills, and/or ideas that you will use in your teaching in the future? (Teachers – AW Exit Survey, n=32)	**88%**
Have your teachers developed new strategies, skills, and/or ideas this year that they've used in their teaching? (School Leaders – End of Year, n=17)	**100%**
Have you learned new strategies, skills, and/or ideas this year that you've used in your teaching? (Teachers – End of Year, n=198)	**83%**

% responding high/very high; somewhat/very; some/many

How School Leaders Promote Teacher Practice in HOT Schools

Administrative support for HOT Schools programming is a key catalyst for expanding teacher practice and fostering pedagogical risk-taking. Principals describe how important it is to engage alongside their faculty during PD or performances—sitting on the floor, engaging in movement, songwriting, theater, and creative play. This modeling of vulnerability and risk-taking signals to staff that stepping outside traditional comfort zones is safe and valued.

> *I think for me, it's important for the teachers to see me being a part of the learning process. We're all learning together because you set that tone for us to be lifelong learners, right? So if there is a PD happening, I can't be absent. I am a part of it. We're all learning together, and so basically modeling how we're supposed to be lifelong learners by continuously learning to improve teaching and learning for our kids.*
> *—HOT Schools Principal*

After an AW or PD session, principals described their practices in cultivating creativity among teachers and supporting their pedagogical risks. They do this through intentional planning time together, continued follow-up on strategies experienced with TAs, and the encouragement of peer learning among faculty.

> *I always say the best Professional Development is next door. Teachers are always welcome to go into another person's classroom to observe. —HOT Schools Principal*

By granting explicit permission for innovation and risk taking, coaching teachers to "start small" with low-stakes routines, and protecting time for planning and collaboration, principals empower and encourage faculty to take creative instructional risks. As one teacher noted regarding administrative support:

> *My principal takes an active role by observing classroom instruction, offering valuable feedback, and recognizing effective teaching practices and student achievements. By fostering an environment that values curiosity, innovation, and continuous learning, they help ensure that higher-order thinking remains a central focus throughout the school community. —HOT Schools Teacher*

V. Goal: Improve Student Engagement

Engaging students in their own learning is at the center of all of HOT Schools' work. Programming is designed to be interactive, authentic, fun, and flexible. That is, students and teachers in the Arts Workshops, the Arts Integrated Residencies and School-Wide Performances 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.

> *What successfully increasing student engagement 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

As indicated on year-end surveys, 95% of HOT Schools teachers feel their students were actively engaged in learning this year, and 94% agreed that students' creative expression was supported. All (100%) of school leaders also agreed that their students were "somewhat" or "very" engaged in learning this year.

One teacher described their observation of this increased engagement when responding to a question about what they, the teacher, had realized this year:

> *[I learned that] providing students opportunities to step just to the side of the content, to look at it a different way, approach it from a different direction, take it somewhere unexpected, allowed a lot of students to start showing up and taking risks in my content classroom. It helped build relationships between myself and my students that weren't solely focused through the content. —HOT Schools Teacher*

Survey Question (timing)	%
How well was your students' creative expression supported this year? (EOY-Teacher, n=198)	**94%**
Were your students actively engaged in their learning this year? (EOY-Teacher, n=198)	**95%**
Were your students actively engaged in their learning this year? (EOY, School Leader, n=17)	**100%**

% well/very well; somewhat/very; some/many

From the students' perspective, the vast majority of those responding to surveys at the end of the school year (n=927) indicated a positive impact of HOT Schools on their participation in school (89%). They also indicated that they had opportunities for creative expression (84%) and that they now feel more confident in their own creativity (84%).

> *This year through the Artist in Residence program, I learned that I am more creative and confident than I thought. Working with other artists and sharing ideas helped me step outside of my comfort zone and express myself in new ways. —HOT Schools Student*

End of Year Student Surveys (n=927)	%
How often did you participate at school this year?	**89%**
Do you feel that your participation mattered at school this year?	**86%**
Did you develop new interests this year?	**79%**
Do you now feel more confident in your own creativity?	**84%**
During this school year, did you have the opportunity to express yourself creatively?	**84%**

% well/very well; somewhat/very; some/many; often/very often

Additional evidence of student growth and engagement was apparent in the short open-ended responses to a question on the end of year survey asking students what they had learned about themselves or their community. Among the hundreds of responses, one emerging theme was students' recognition of their own creativity. Just a few examples of these short responses include:

- Something I learned about myself is I'm very good at thinking outside the box
- I learned that creativity is good
- I'm good at drawing
- I learned that I can do things if I put my mind to it like when we were folding paper cranes I had a hard time, but then I worked hard on it and now [I am making more]
- I learned that I am really creative and have a lot of ideas;
- I learned that there are many different ways to make art and there are different ways to express ourselves in dance
- I learned, if I participate, I will learn more
- I learned I can perform dance at school

School leaders and teachers responding to end-of-year surveys indicated that they saw even higher levels of creative expression and social emotional skills. This was evident with 100% of leaders and 92% of teachers saying that their students' social emotional learning was supported by HOT Schools, and that students had chances to express themselves creatively throughout the year.

> *With many of my students, it had been a struggle to get them to be risk-takers, to try and possibly fail at sharing an idea. Now I've got a better sense of the ways in which they can be motivated to take risks. Several students that often appear disinterested showed me through the activities and their reflections that they are engaging more fully with our content than I'd noticed. I also have a much better sense of my students' interests and activities outside of school. —HOT Schools Teacher*

How School Leaders Promote Increased Student Engagement

By encouraging teachers to prioritize creative expression and take instructional risks, leaders ensure that learning offers accessible entry points for all students—particularly those who struggle with traditional teaching approaches. By supporting teachers to adopt and practice these new strategies, student engagement increases and creative expression becomes a common practice in the classroom. When staff voices are sought out by leadership, teachers in turn model these practices for their students, promoting authentic student voice, leadership, and agency in and out of the classroom.

> *The greatest impact of HOT Schools programming has been on teacher practice and student engagement. By partnering with professional artists, teachers are exposed to new instructional strategies that encourage creativity, inquiry, and hands-on learning. —HOT Schools Administrator*

> *I noticed how student engagement in learning has increased, leading to students feeling seen and heard. This has greatly impacted their sense of belonging within our school. —HOT Schools Administrator*

VI. Goal: Enrich School Culture

> *Our community is strongest when everyone feels seen, valued, and supported. —HOT Schools Teacher*

A school's culture is made up of the values and beliefs that are shared by members of a school community. HOT Schools programming includes numerous opportunities to enrich school culture through collaborative learning, culturally responsive teaching approaches, celebrations of creative expressions, and a focus on democratic practices which emphasize student voice. When a school community engages in common creative experiences that stimulate the senses and promote shared joy, individuals form connections that promote a stronger and more connected school culture.

> *What an enriched school culture 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

Students, teachers, and school administrators indicated an increased sense of connection and belonging within classrooms and across the school community. This was evidenced by teachers after participating in an AIR (100% of teachers), AW (97%), and at the end of the year (85%). Teachers and administrators realized the impact that shared experiences can have on their communities.

> *The importance of arts integration cannot be underestimated. Creating and embedding specifically tailored activities with artists in residence promotes deeper understanding and a stronger school culture.*
> *—HOT Schools Teacher*

Survey Question (timing)	%
To what extent did this AIR increase a sense of connection and/or belonging in your class? (AIR, Teacher, n=21)	**100%**
To what extent did this AW increase a sense of connection and/or belonging in your class? (AW, Teacher, n=32)	**97%**
Was there an increase in a sense of connection and/or belonging among your school community this year? (EOY, Teacher, n=198)	**85%**

% well/very well; somewhat/very; some/many; often/very often

Teachers also talked about their own connection to students; through creative activities they were able to form deeper relationships with students as they learned more about their cultural backgrounds, interests, strengths, and creativity. Stronger relationships between the adults and children in a school are essential to nurturing a shared culture.

After an AIR, one teacher described all of the things she learned about her students and their identities throughout the process…

> *After reading the students' odes, analyzing their collages, and watching their dances I know much more about their cultures and their emerging identities. I learned that several of my students know how to dance bachata from the Dominican Republic, one of my students is a skilled gymnast who loves movement, many students want to be chefs to cook cultural foods, one students shows leadership quietly and works efficiently within her group, and that some of my quietest students have the loudest voices as poets. I loved providing students a more creative space to express themselves while also showing their learning. —HOT Schools Teacher*

Students described aspects of school culture through their accounts of the connections that they feel in the classrooms and with peers. The vast majority of students indicated that they had opportunities to work collaboratively with their classmates (91%) and now better understand their classmates (89%) after participating in HOT Schools this year.

Student Survey Questions (n=927)	%
Do you now better understand your classmates?	**89%**
Did you work collaboratively with your classmates?	**91%**

% well/very well; somewhat/very; some/many; often/very often

> *I learned that expressing creativity causes more connecting with classmates. —HOT Schools Student*

A review of the student open-ended responses yielded a number of statements about community, belonging, and togetherness. Many of these also indicated that students learned about their peers throughout the year.

- I learned how much I love art! I also learned how good my community is at art. In ever knew to be honest
- I learned that I love working in groups and I feel warm around my community
- I learned that my community is very creative
- Something I learned about my community is that when we come together anything can happen.
- This year, I learned that my community is more relaxed and enthusiastic while doing a fun activity
- I learned how to work together and be confident around others

- I learned lots of my classmates have lots of different interests
- This year, I learned a lot about myself. I unlocked many new things in my life. I now like to perform more with people watching because of the plays we have done in 5th grade with our teachers.
- I learned that this school is more connected than I thought

HOT Schools Professional Development also fostered greater connection among school staff. Engaging together as a group in creative activities, expressing vulnerability, and taking risks while learning together has an impact on adults as well as children. Almost all (98%) of teachers indicated that the experience increased a sense of connection with staff peers after a PD workshop.

Survey Question (timing)	%
To what extent did this PD create an increased sense of connection with your peers? (PD, Teacher, n=395)	**98%**
Was there an increase in a sense of connection and/or belonging among your school community this year? (EOY, Leader, n=17)	**88%**

% well/very well; somewhat/very; some/many; often/very often

> *By intentionally including all staff members—especially our paraeducators—in our afterschool Professional Development and the ECHOs project, we broke down traditional silos and united the entire adult community around a shared creative vision. —HOT Schools Administrator*

> *This year, I learned the importance of flexibility, patience, and building strong relationships within a school community. I saw how much students benefit when they feel supported and understood, and I also realized how valuable collaboration among staff can be. Even during challenging moments, our community continued to show resilience, teamwork, and a shared commitment to helping students grow. —HOT Schools Teacher*

How School Leaders Promote a Strong School Culture

As the leaders of the school, administrators are essential to enriching and maintaining school culture at all levels. With the inclusion of HOT Schools in their school communities, principals are committing to the values of the program and setting the stage to create a culture of creativity, risk-taking, and belonging. To do this, administrators must advocate for support at the district level. Administrators who participated in interviews reported that maintaining an arts integrated model requires continuous advocacy with central office administrators who may not understand or appreciate non-traditional methods. In order to do this, a principal needs to fully understand the approach and fully believe in it.

> *You have to have the nerve to say no… If you don't believe in it, then it would be a tragedy if the teachers believed in it and the leader didn't. —HOT Schools Principal*

Advocacy doesn’t just happen outwardly, however. Multiple principals described the importance of internal communication among staff, students, and families as key to keeping the momentum of HOT Schools going between visits, and keeping arts at the top of everyone’s minds. This was done through internal sharing of successes between teachers, in student showcases and performances to peers and families, and through regular newsletters and communications to their communities. By consistently keeping arts integration on leadership team agendas and incorporating creative modalities into routine check-ins and everyday instruction, principals move the program beyond a periodic event and embed it into the permanent fabric of the school community, ultimately impacting school culture.

> *As a leader I have to consistently model and emphasize the importance of our artistic approach, ensuring that the arts receive the same amount of attention as math, literacy and science. —HOT Schools Principal*

VII. Conclusion

The data collected during the 2025–2026 school year indicates that the HOT Schools program is consistently meeting its goals of expanding teacher practice, increasing student engagement, and enhancing school culture. Feedback gathered from students, teachers and administrators shows that HOT Schools facilitates multiple opportunities for all members of the school community to come together and engage in shared creative experiences, leading to stronger relationships and an increased sense of belonging. Teachers and staff have the chance to gather as learners during Professional Development and to spend time planning with TAs and administrators. This sense of community is central to promoting trust and risk taking in teaching and learning, for teachers, students, and leaders alike.

As one leader articulated…

> *[Through HOT Schools]…I have realized that community is built when teachers and students feel safe to share ideas, take risks, and learn from one another. Trust and collaboration are key to building connections among staff and between staff and students. —HOT Schools Principal*

This sense of community is a culmination of the work of HOT Schools to further develop teacher skills and practice, and to deeply engage students in arts-centered learning. With almost all (96%) teachers participating in the Professional Development reporting learning new skills and strategies, and then having structured opportunities to apply those in the classroom alongside teaching artists, students had the chance to access content in new ways. Ninety-five percent (95%) of teachers reported that their students were actively engaged in the classroom this year. These findings parallel results from evaluations of similar arts integration initiatives that showed impact on student engagement, teacher practice, and cultural cohesion (Miller, 2018; Brouillette, 2014; Duma 2014).

How Leaders Contribute

Interviews with school administrators suggest that it is apparent that effective leadership in HOT Schools starts with modeling the values and democratic processes that are inherent in the program. This begins with AFLCT program staff and Teaching Artists who model playfulness and collaborative arts practices for administrators and teachers during Professional Development sessions. School leaders then model vulnerability and creative risk-taking for their faculty by participating in the program as learners alongside them, and teachers, in turn, learn to model these same behaviors for their students. This development allows student voice to become central to the classroom and the school experience, eventually permeating into the school culture.

> *No learning can happen without a level of vulnerability, and real true collaboration can't happen without a level of vulnerability. That's where our creativity and playfulness come from. I think that's a quality that leaders should try to emulate. —HOT Schools Principal*

Administrators' commitment to HOT Schools' philosophy and programming promotes teacher innovation and creativity, deepens student engagement, and transforms Teaching Artist visits into a lasting culture of arts integration. The findings in this report align with research by the Arts Education Partnership (2018) which found that cultivating a school identity around the arts requires principals to establish a school-wide commitment to

arts learning, create an arts-rich learning environment, and strategically examine their use of time and resources. One teacher's survey response illustrates this:

> *In practice, the principal moves the work from a program or initiative to a coherent school-wide way of teaching and learning by aligning vision, structures, support, and accountability around higher order thinking. —HOT Schools Teacher*

As administrators cultivate an environment that supports embedding arts integration into daily practices, protecting teachers' creative autonomy, and actively models democratic values, teachers are able to continually take creative risks in the classroom, providing new and engaging experiences for their students. Students learn that they (and their classmates) have valuable ideas that can be expressed in a variety of ways and gain confidence in sharing those ideas. This context allows students the safety to dive deeper into a subject alongside their classmates and to express what they have learned in a variety of ways, from movement to poetry. This is articulated clearly by one administrator, who said:

> *Our community grows stronger when artists and schools collaborate. By engaging artists with students, HOT Schools creates meaningful opportunities for self-expression, critical thinking, and cultural exploration. These partnerships inspire students to take creative risks, build confidence, and discover new ways to understand themselves and the world around them. The arts are not just an enrichment—they are a powerful tool for learning, connection, and community building. —HOT Schools Principal*

VIII. References

Bower, A., & Moctezuma, J., (n.d.). *How School Leaders Can Support Arts Integration*. https://www.kennedy-center.org/education/resources-for-educators/classroom-resources/articles-and-how-tos/articles/educators/professional-development/how-school-leaders-can-support-arts-integration/

Brouillette, L., Childress-Evans, K., Hinga, B., & Farkas, G. (2014). Increasing the school engagement and oral language skills of ELLs through arts integration in the primary grades. *Journal for Learning through the Arts*, *10*(1). https://doi.org/10.21977/D910119300

Duma, A. L., & Silverstein, L. B. (2014). Cross-study findings: A view into a decade of arts integration. *Journal for Learning through the Arts*, *10*(1). https://doi.org/10.21977/D910119197

Miller, J. A., & Bogatova, T. (2018). Arts in education: The impact of the arts integration program and lessons learned. *Journal for Learning through the Arts*, *14*(1). https://doi.org/10.21977/D914128357