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Public Schools Slash Arts Education And Turn To Private Funding

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Chicago Public Schools (CPS) dealt a blow to arts education when it laid off over 1,000 teachers as a result of its recent decision to close over 50 schools. Among the most affected areas was arts education—[nearly 10 percent](#) of teachers let go taught art or music.

The Chicago Sun-Times reported that among the 1,581 CPS teachers laid off, 105 taught art or music. The Chicago Teachers Union is alleging that the city under-reported the number of layoffs and estimates that [these numbers are higher](#): It says 1,715 total teachers were laid off, with 159 in the art or music departments.

Chicago isn't alone. In even more dire news, Philadelphia's city schools are dealing with a [\\$304 million budget shortfall](#) by completely eliminating funding for art and music programs, [among other painful cuts](#).

As schools across the country have faced budget shortfalls in recent years, a common cost-cutting measure is to slash funding for arts education, prioritizing what are deemed more essential subjects such as math, reading, and science. Los Angeles and Washington, DC, for example, join Chicago and Philadelphia in this trend.

Yet federal funds for arts education are also drying up. President Obama [restored federal funding](#) for arts organizations such as the National Endowment for the Arts and the Kennedy Center after sequestration threatened to place them on the chopping block. But one program that is not being funded this year is Arts in Education, a program within the Department of Education that awards grants for arts teacher training. Instead, it is being combined into an umbrella program that covers health education, financial literacy, foreign language, and physical education. Opponents say that this makes the arts even more vulnerable. By lumping the arts with other fields, there is no single organization devoted to educational grants in the arts.

With so little public funding, schools are now relying more on private funds and patrons of the arts to provide creative outlets for students. In February, the Washington Post [reported on a growing trend](#): nonprofit arts organizations setting aside more funding for arts education and outreach to local schools. These efforts include partnerships between orchestras and schools, such as OrchKids, an educational program run by the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra (BSO), which is now the biggest school arts program in Baltimore. The BSO spends \$2 million annually on education programs, and nationally, the amount of educational initiatives sponsored by orchestras tripled between 1990 and 2010, according to the League of American Orchestras.

Some schools rely on a mix of private and public funds. Also profiled in the Post is Savoy Elementary School in Washington D.C., which was labeled a “turnaround school,” making it eligible for funds from the President’s Committee on the Arts & Humanities. But Savoy also receives support from private sources like the Washington Performing Arts Society, which sponsored a visit from cellist Yo-Yo Ma.

Other schools are taking direct action to prioritize the arts in order to preserve public funding. Last year, the Los Angeles Unified School District, the [second largest school district in the country](#), [voted to make the arts a core subject](#). As the district’s senior arts coordinator Steven McCarthy told Southern California Public Radio, “when things start getting cut, legal mandates win, and other things fall to the wayside.” His department was acutely affected—he is the school district’s only staff member involved with its arts education branch, which was once 20 people strong. Thus, by mandating the arts, L.A. Unified is making arts education funding less vulnerable to budget cuts and will be able to restore at least some of the \$60 million in funding it has been forced to eliminate since 2007. But even this plan doesn’t entirely eliminate the need for private dollars: It is relying on a [\\$4 million fundraising campaign](#) by the LA Fund for Public Education, seeking out generous private donors.