

October 14, 2018

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Arts Standards Quietly Take Hold in 14 States

14 states are using the new guidelines

By **Jaclyn Zubrzycki**

March 21, 2017

When Ellie Jacovino began teaching general music in Arizona six years ago, the state's standards for arts dictated some of her classroom activities very specifically. Her kindergartners were to "describe what a piece of music makes them think of or about." Older students were to write a story when exposed to a "specific piece" of music.

Now, Jacovino might still ask her students at Sunset Elementary School in Glendale to describe music or write a story. But the standards she plans her teaching around don't require that. Arizona adopted new arts standards in 2015, and now "it's more about the concepts than the activities," Jacovino said.

Arizona is one of more than a dozen states that has adopted new arts standards informed by the National Core Arts **Standards**, a set of voluntary standards in dance, theater, visual arts, music, and media arts developed by a coalition of more than 50 arts organizations and educators and released in 2014. And even as the better-known **Common Core** State Standards for English/language arts and math in recent years began to draw fierce opposition, this standards push is largely happening without controversy.

As of early this year, 14 states and the Department of Defense Education Activity had either adopted the National Core Arts Standards in their entirety or written new ones based on them. Several more states are expected to follow suit in the coming months.

The National Core Arts Standards mark a significant development in arts education: They include, for the first time, a fifth artistic discipline, media arts, as well as guidelines for individual grades instead of broader "grade bands." They are more accessible online than previous standards, and come paired with model assessments to guide teachers.

While the previous national arts standards, developed in 1994, treated each artistic discipline as entirely separate, the new standards are framed around what they have in common. They still include concepts specific to each discipline, but all of them are organized around a set of anchor standards and creative processes shared by all five disciplines, such as "creating" or "responding."

The shift mirrors similar changes in other academic subject-area standards: The Next Generation Science Standards and the College, Career, and Civic Life Framework for social studies are both organized around concepts, core ideas, and practices rather than specific facts.

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"There's been a revolution in standards in every subject," said Jeff M. Poulin, the program manager for arts education at Americans for the Arts, one of the groups involved in developing the standards. "It makes sense that the arts be on board."

Processes, Not Particulars

In the early 1990s, arts education organizations, supported by the National Endowment for the Arts, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the U.S. Department of Education, devised the first-ever national arts standards. Each discipline's standards were written separately and structured differently. They were adopted by 49 states.

The 2014 standards resulted from a different process: While the arts endowment provided some support, the initiative was driven by arts education organizations. The National Coalition for Core Arts Standards worked on the standards for three years and incorporated more than a million comments from thousands of educators and researchers into the final draft.

State arts leaders said that it had become clear that the **1994 standards** were outdated. They were hard to access online and harder still to update. While the first standards had been groundbreaking, "we realized after 20 years, it was really time" for new standards, said Deb Hansen, an education associate for arts education at the Delaware education department. The new standards focus less on what a teacher should be doing and instead set out the eventual goals of instruction—a method known as "backward design."

The National Coalition for Core Arts Standards landed on four guiding processes:

- **Creating:** generating and conceptualizing artistic ideas and work, organizing and developing artistic ideas and work, and refining and completing that work;
- **Performing/Presenting/Producing:** analyzing and interpreting artistic work, selecting work for presentation, developing and refining work for presentation, and conveying meaning through the presentation of art;
- **Responding:** perceiving and analyzing artistic work, interpreting intent, and evaluating artistic work; and
- **Connecting:** synthesizing and relating knowledge and personal experiences to make art and relating artistic ideas and works with societal, cultural, and historical context.

The coalition is also in the process of piloting a set of **Model Cornerstone Assessments**, which are complex tasks that hit on all aspects of the standards and document student growth. The high school standards are laid out separately for students with different degrees of ambition in or access to the arts.

Cory Wilkerson, a project manager at the State Education Agency Directors of Arts Education, or SEADAE, said having the shared processes and sample assessments helps arts educators see connections between their subjects. "Standards and disciplines that aren't my own suddenly make sense," she said.

Media Arts

Media arts, in which various arts are combined with modern technology, was a less familiar discipline for many arts educators. (A video game, graphic design, or music video might fall into the category of "media arts.")

When the standards were being developed, some disagreement arose about whether to include standards for media arts or to incorporate the discipline into other standards. Local efforts in some cities and states were seen as early signs of the emergence of a new discipline. But there were concerns that the addition of a new art could draw resources or time. Others worried that media arts was simply too new an art form to have standards.

Richard W. Burrows, the former director of arts education in the Los Angeles school district and a co-chairman of the committee that wrote the new standards for media arts,

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said that starting from scratch had benefits "because it was a new art form and didn't have any demands or expectations." It also contributed to the inclusion of "connecting" with art as one of the primary creative processes.

While media arts now has a set of standards, there is no professional association of media-arts teachers. And not all states seem set to adopt the media-arts standards.

Under the Radar

In 2014, when the Common Core State Standards in English/language arts and math had become so unpopular that states were getting rid of them, pitching standards with the phrase "national core" in their name posed a political challenge. But in most states, the new arts standards were introduced without incident. Arts groups emphasized that the standards were voluntary, that states could tweak them, and that they were crafted by groups of educators. Some states, including Delaware and Vermont, adopted the standards in their entirety. In others, the new standards served as a template that was adjusted significantly by state educators and policymakers.

States also have different approaches to ensuring the standards are actually taught. In Delaware and New Hampshire, state regulations require schools to show that they have standards-based instruction in all subjects, including the arts.

For many arts teachers, implementing the standards might pose a challenge. Some teachers might see students just 25 minutes a week, or 10 weeks a year, said Lynn Tuttle, the director of content and policy at the National Association for Music Education.

Music and dance organizations are trying to respond to that challenge by producing separate "opportunity to learn" standards, which would outline the kinds of instructional materials, time, and other resources that allow for rigorous arts instruction.

In Arizona, Jacovino, who was on the state's standards-writing team, said that the emphasis in the standards on creating music was a reminder to encourage her students to compose more. She said the state's new standards also help make a case for teaching the arts to administrators and parents.

"I'm not in a school or district where I feel I have to defend my job," she said, "but from an administrative point of view, having it laid out and seeing the progression gives them more of an expectation and makes sure they know what they're looking for."

Coverage of leadership, expanded learning time, and arts learning is supported in part by a grant from The Wallace Foundation, at www.wallacefoundation.org. Education Week retains sole editorial control over the content of this coverage.

Vol. 36, Issue 25, Page 8

Published in Print: March 22, 2017, as **Arts Standards Stress Broad Concepts, Include Media Arts**

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