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WHY WE CELEBRATE: THE POWER OF YOUTH VOICE



[\(/users/727\)](#) Submitted by [Mr. Jeff M. Poulin \(/users/727\)](#) on Fri, 2017-09-15 16:55

Young people inspire me. Their voices on honesty, hope, and belief in the future challenge me to be a better advocate and leader to ensure the advancement of arts education in America. For these reasons, I was so excited to celebrate [National Arts in Education Week on ARTSblog](#) (<http://blog.americansforthearts.org/categories/blog-salon-category/because-of-arts-ed>) by featuring youth voice every day this week.

In January of this year, when asked the question, "What single strategy can advance arts education in this new chapter of American education policy?" the Americans for the Arts' Arts Education Advisory Council resoundingly answered in unison: "Empower Young People!" So, we did, and this blog salon is just one example of how we have been engaging and empowering youth voices to be advocates for the future of the field of arts education.

The theme of the week, [#BecauseOfArtsEd](#) (<https://twitter.com/hashtag/BecauseofArtsEd?src=hash>), has elicited the stories of the transformative power of the arts in education in a profound way. I've shared my own [#BecauseOfArtsEd](#) story at over 100 gatherings around this nation and in the last year alone, there were tens of

thousands of stories shared by my peers. But this year, it was high time we brought the focus back to the young people.

As a young person myself, I witnessed the change created from the ripple of a student's voice. As a youth, I worked for the Maine Youth Action Network—a network of youth programs dedicated to empowering young people to make positive change in communities across the state. During the end of my tenure, I was associated with a project to implement a new law which enabled two young people to sit on the State Board of Education. This was incredible to me, to engage youth voice at that level of power. Additionally, we saw many local boards of education (including my own in the small town of Scarborough) also utilize this strategy. Years later, I still see the impact of this work, not only through more comprehensive and inclusive education policy in the state, but also in the leaders the program produced. One of the first youth to sit on the State Board of Education was Justin Chenette—now Maine State Senator Justin Chenette—who also has gone on to found the Saco Bay Center for Civic Engagement, which specifically supports arts education programs.

So, as I have read the blogs shared this week from young people coast to coast, I wonder—which of them will be the next leaders of our field? Will we see a renaissance in arts education to include culturally specific art forms? Will we see a new generation of advocates to speak to Congress and State Legislatures? Which of these bloggers will bring their message to the mainstream media or forefront of research?

The answers to these questions, I hope, are yes, yes, and all of them.

We don't empower young people for the simple concept of empowering young people—but instead because it is the right thing to do. How dare we sit around as adults to discuss the future of arts education without the young people who participate and benefit from that arts education present? Additionally, I know that from experiences like advocating publicly, we are building the leadership skills of the next generation through intergenerational dialogue and cyclical mentorship. We learn just as much from young people as they do from us. Lastly, we know that decision-makers respect the power of authentic youth voice, speaking from experience.

So, my message this National Arts in Education Week is simple: Let us take the lead of our youth to support a shared vision for the future of arts education in America. Please go back and [re-read the blogs \(http://blog.americansforthearts.org/categories/blog-salon-category/because-of-arts-ed\)](http://blog.americansforthearts.org/categories/blog-salon-category/because-of-arts-ed) we have posted with that vision for the future, which includes these young people as leaders. It is up to us to support them in this work.

As we celebrate the transformative power of the arts in education, we must also support each other and most importantly our young people, so we all may advocate for the arts and participate in arts education together.

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Americans for the Arts serves, advances, and leads the network of organizations and individuals who cultivate, promote, sustain, and support the arts in America. Founded in 1960, Americans for the Arts is the nation's leading nonprofit organization for advancing the arts and arts education.

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