

SDYS Community Opus Lessons for Us All

By Ronnie Ragen, Program Director, Trenton Community Music School, Trenton, NJ

"Our message used to be – 'Please don't cut!' Now it's 'Come and see what's happening!'"

– Joe Landon, Executive Director of the CA Alliance for Arts Education

In mid-March, more than one hundred Arts Education supporters gathered in San Diego for the first [Arts Education Learning Exchange](#) conference, to witness and celebrate "what's happening." The conference, presented by the California Alliance for Arts Education and Arts Now California, highlighted two San Diego-area districts that, with the help of highly committed private partners, have made the arts central to learning in their schools. In Chula Vista Elementary School District, a five-year partnership with the [San Diego Youth Symphony and Conservatory](#) (SDYS) culminated with the district committing \$15 million over three years to hire 70 credentialed arts teachers in dance, music, theatre, and visual arts – this in a district that had had no arts teachers for 15 years. In San Diego Unified School District, the district has committed \$3 million in Title I funds to establish a district-wide arts integration program in 22 schools, pairing classroom teachers with teaching artists to provide effective arts integration across the curriculum.

In Chula Vista, the transformation began with a vision articulated by SDYS over six years ago: "to make music education accessible and affordable for all." El Sistema values were at the heart of this vision. Under the leadership of Executive Director Dalouge Smith, SDYS began by applying the [10 Sistema Fundamentals](#) to a plan for the entire district education ecosystem.

Their Sistema-inspired after-school program, [Community Opus Project](#), was introduced in 2010. By year three, with 200 students, the change in school culture – student excitement, improved attendance, motivation, parental engagement – was so palpable the administration couldn't help but take notice. As a result, the district decided to prioritize the re-introduction of in-school music instruction.

Perhaps the most moving part of the conference was meeting and hearing from impassioned parents who went 30-strong to a new principal to demand that

the middle school start an instrumental instruction program, so their children moving up from elementary school Opus programs would be able to continue playing music. It was also thrilling to hear principals



Opus Student Noor Alramadan guides her group of conference-goers to see sessions of the Community Opus Project Spring Music Camp; Ronnie Ragen (in green sweater) stands just behind Noor. Photographer: Ken Jacques

and superintendents speak about their new arts programs with the fluency of veteran arts education advocates. As Chula Vista Superintendent Francisco Escobedo said, "We want each child to thrive, not just cope. How can you thrive without the arts?"

So what about sustainability? Conference days 2 and 3 provided close inspection of the "Every Student Succeeds Act" (ESSA) and the application of Title I funding to large-scale arts-integration programming.

Both of these federal programs offer opportunities and promise for public/private partnering aimed at reinvigorating arts instruction across the country.

The "Every Student Succeeds Act" (ESSA) replaces the "No Child Left Behind" act and will come into effect in 2017. The bill shrinks the federal role in education reform and hands more decision-making to the states. The visual and performing arts, both in and after-school, are included in its definition of a "well-rounded education," making the inclusion of the arts in schools THE LAW. We were told, "ESSA is on the way; we'd better get out in front of it".

The Day 3 program showcased the San Diego Unified School District's ambitious "[Learning Through the Arts](#)," a Title I-funded arts-integration program. The Superintendent, Cindy Marten, inspired us with her fiery determination to infuse arts across all learning in California's second largest school district. We visited classes in which teaching artists taught side by side with classroom teachers to deepen student understanding and make them more flexible learners.

The final panel, with arts education leaders from across the country, emphasized the necessity for "seizing this moment" and doing our part to make the San Diego story "go viral." I left feeling an uncommon sense of urgency and excitement. Let's do it!

FROM THE EDITOR

From zero arts teachers in the district, to more than 70 arts teachers in the district – in less than five years. The arts ed success story of the Chula Vista school district is mind-boggling. We are so used to seeing those numbers go in the opposite direction!

The transformation of the district from arts-starved to arts-abundant was fueled by the unmistakable success of the El Sistema-inspired [Community Opus Project](#) and the vision of its leaders. The [San Diego Youth Symphony](#), which founded Opus and helped lead the district transformation, has set out to create a model for intensive partnership with the public school district. "For fullest impact," says SDYS leader Dalouge Smith, "in-school and after-school music programs must work in complement."

For me, one of the most interesting questions about this model is how it's possible to create "Sistema-inflected" learning environments in an in-school framework. I talked about this with Dalouge and with Lauren Shelton, the district's elementary coordinator for visual and performing arts. "When we created the pilot for the in-school program," said Lauren, "the teachers were Opus teachers. So Sistema values were infused into the classroom from the very beginning." She added that these values are woven into the professional development for all in-school music teachers.

Intensity is one of those important Sistema values. "We think of intensity here as a multi-platform experience," said Dalouge. "There is the in-school experience, plus the Opus experience, and for the most advanced kids, there's the youth symphony. The intensity is in the compounded experience."

Parent and community involvement, they stressed, is one of the most important elements of Sistema practice that is infused throughout the district. "The Opus teachers are the leaders in showing how you as a music teacher can bring your community inside your classroom," said Lauren.

At the core is the ideal of access and equity. Lauren said that younger teachers often come fired up with the spirit of making social outcomes happen from music learning. "They say that here, they can actually do what they set out to do as teachers!"

"We are on the brink of an arts education renaissance," Dalouge added. "And arts educators are derelict if we are not engaged in the larger conversation about widening access. It's big. And it's happening."

Tricia Tunstall

"The day our public schools include teaching the arts to every single student, from two-year-olds to university students, as part of their basic curriculum – that day, our country will become a different country."

– José Antonio Abreu

News Notes

The Ensemble is always eager to learn of smart ideas other programs might borrow. This month we learned of [Sistema Toronto's *I Am I Create* weeklong program](#) in January, which brought the improvisation facilitators Ron Davis and Carissa Neufeld to the Parkdale Centre. Exercises in freeing up the students' sound production culminated in the creation of an improvised soundtrack to a clip from Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times*.



Rehearsing with film in Sistema Toronto's *I Am I Create* program at Parkdale. Photo: Darren Sustar

In recent research, Animating Democracy has focused on [grantmaking whose primary purpose is to advance social justice with arts and culture, calling it a contributor to healthy, equitable communities](#). This webinar highlights three funders' stories and some findings from the research. <https://artsu.americansforthearts.org/products/social-justice-funders-supporting-arts-for-change>

For those thinking big about [community change and collective impact](#), here is a heartfelt article in the *Stanford Social Innovation Review* that addresses the realities we face. <http://tinyurl.com/oepttbl>

[Enriching Lives through Music](#) (a Sistema-inspired program in San Raphael, CA) recently completed their [Creative Composing Camp](#), and they have a film that captures the kind of work they did, and its impact on students. <https://vimeo.com/151715931> For more information contact Jane Kramer: jane@elmprogram.org

Resources

Here are two articles that make a strong case (and provide advice, examples and strategies) for the [importance of parental involvement](#) in schooling and learning. They reinforce one another in affirming that students succeed much better academically and socially when there is a strong two-way relationship between families and schools. <http://www.districtadministration.com/article/districts-work-bolster-parent-involvement>. The second is from the U.S. Dept. of Education framework for family-school partnerships. <http://www2.ed.gov/documents/family-community/partnership-frameworks.pdf> As the front page article notes, active parental leadership has been a key feature of the SDYS/Opus success in Chula Vista.

California Institute of the Arts (CalArts) again offers its [Summer Residency for Teaching Artists](#). It's a five-week intensive program (May 23-June 24), and participating artists earn nine units of credit. The [application](#) deadline is April 15th; all levels of experience are welcome. For more information, contact Glenna Avila: glenna@calarts.edu

If you don't have time for an inspiring conference or for reading books or reports filled with provocative thoughts about achieving your organizational goals, there is a good series of [white papers available from Grantmakers in the Arts](#). These succinct descriptions detail ways that organizations involved in bold systemic local change are approaching their ambitious missions. <http://tinyurl.com/hoq2b6f>

The National Endowment for the Arts [Challenge America grants](#) of \$10,000 (requiring a \$10,000 match) support small or mid-sized organizations, to extend the reach of the arts to populations underserved by geography, ethnicity, economics, or disability. The application deadline is April 14, 2016 for projects beginning on or after January 1, 2017 – <http://tinyurl.com/jyb469j>. Projects should be distinct activities that are small in scale and short in duration. An archive of a helpful Challenge America webinar is available: <https://www.arts.gov/video/challenge-america-guidelines-workshop-0>.

Facebook has launched a new website to help non-profit organizations refine and extend all the ways they can [make better use of Facebook](#). <https://nonprofits.fb.com>

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Across the Americas

By Jose Luis Hernandez-Estrada, Barnes Foundation Director of [Sistema Tulsa](#)

What began as a simple spaghetti dinner with Maestro Abreu in New York quickly turned into a continental mission – as things tend to do, with the Maestro. “We are going to generate a continental project with the Simon Bolivar Orchestra of Venezuela,” he told me. I had just heard him give a lecture at Carnegie Hall about unifying the Americas through music, and we talked about the mentoring relationships of two Mexican musical giants, composer Carlos Chavez and conductor Eduardo Mata, with the Simon Bolivar Orchestra in its early days. It's imperative, Abreu told me, that the spirit of this once-thriving alliance be rekindled.

In short order, I was in Caracas with two of Mexico's top young musicians, bringing a new piano concerto to the Bolivars. The piano soloist was Abdiel Vazquez; the piece we premiered was *Piramide del Sol*, by Juan Pablo Contreras.

Working with this orchestra, I experienced firsthand the total commitment to music and the generosity of spirit that contribute to their distinctive greatness. I got used to hearing the brass section continue to fine-tune intricate passages long after our rehearsal ended. (The power of the string sound was a treasure to witness at close hand!) It was common for me to receive words of encouragement from orchestra members. Right before the performance, many wished me well.

What can we learn from the Bolivars, we who work with young U.S./Canadian Sistema programs? First, we need to do everything we can to nurture the feeling of interdependence in our orchestras: “You are responsible for others, and they are responsible for you.” We need to think in terms of inspiring motivation in our ensembles so that they can take ownership of their own learning and outcomes.

The second lesson is about the “continental project.” We need to keep generating links with programs beyond our own geographical domains. The Bolivars' path to becoming one of the world's leading orchestras involved a diligent exchange and confluence of artistic cultures from the Americas to Europe and back. By actively listening to the sound of others, the orchestra was able to find its voice. If we listen closely across continents, we too will begin to find our voices.

“The work of hope requires people who throw themselves actively into what is becoming, to which they themselves belong.” – Ernst Bloch, philosopher