

Arts Learning Keeps Toehold in ESSA

By Jaclyn Zubrzycki

Arts education advocates breathed a sigh of relief last month when the Every Student Succeeds Act, which includes language that cements states' obligation to support arts education programs in public schools, became the new federal education law of the land.

Several proposals for the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act floated earlier last year did not specifically call for funding the creative disciplines. But ESSA, which replaces the No Child Left Behind Act, includes the arts alongside math and language arts in its definition of a "well-rounded education." That

ensures that arts education programs and teachers are eligible to receive federal funds through provisions such as Title I, which supports disadvantaged students, and Title II, which supports teachers.

The new law also includes funding for integrating arts into STEM, short for science, technology, engineering, and math, education and a \$20 million grant program for arts education.

NCLB's Mixed Arts Legacy

While NCLB's emphasis on testing and accountability has been criticized for pushing nontested subjects, including the arts, to the sideline, the law did list the arts as a "core subject." That made arts teachers and programs eligible for federal funds. "Everyone understands the power that a definition had for the arts in No Child Left Behind," said Narric W. Rome, the vice president of government affairs and arts education at Americans for the Arts.

In ESSA, the "core subject" language is dropped, and states are held responsible for a "well-rounded" education, which specifically includes the arts and music.

Chris Woodside, the assistant executive director of the National Association for Music Education, said his organization lobbied to have music called out in the definition in order to make sure that "intentionally or unintentionally, you're not going to have music left out."

But Susan McGreevy-Nichols, the executive director of the National Dance Education Organization, said that while she is pleased by ESSA overall, she is concerned that some policymakers will read "arts" and "music" as "visual arts and music," neglecting other disciplines such as theater, dance, and media arts.

Negotiations over how much federal funding will go to each discipline and to the arts overall will take place at the state and local level, as ESSA gives states more discretion over their accountability systems and plans to improve low-performing schools.



"We need to make sure that administrators understand that the arts are part of the well-rounded curriculum and therefore can receive some of this money that comes down," said Jim Palmarini, the assistant director of the Educational Theatre Association.