

New York City Arts in Education Candidate Survey Project

Mayoral Candidates

The following questions were designed to determine candidates' positions on a number of issues related to the delivery of arts education (including music, dance, theater and visual arts) in New York City public schools. Questionnaires were delivered to all declared candidates for the Office of New York City Mayor.

Candidate: Sal Albanese

1. What meaningful experiences, if any, with the arts, either in school or otherwise, did you have in your life and what did you gain from these experiences?

When I was eight years old, my family immigrated from Calabria, Italy to Brooklyn. As our ship entered New York harbor on a rainy day, I glimpsed the Statue of Liberty. At the time, I did not know what it represented. Even so, I distinctly remember staring in awe at its beauty and powerful presence in the harbor. Needless to say, I quickly learned the lasting impact that art and architecture can have, even on children as young as I was then.

2. It is widely acknowledged that access to a well-rounded curriculum is a key component of a quality education. However, numerous studies show that over the past decade disciplines such as art, science, and social studies are getting crowded out of the school day. In New York City, for instance, only half of all elementary schools are providing the arts instruction that is outlined in state education law. What strategies do you envision for broadening the school-day curriculum?

I spent 11 years teaching in New York City public schools, so I am a big believer in the importance of a well-rounded education. As a student, I had a hard time focusing on the three Rs, but I had to pass three subjects to play on the varsity baseball team. Sports programs were the hook that kept me in school. Over time, I came to appreciate academics, went on to college, earned a Master's from NYU, and earned my law degree from Brooklyn Law School. Other students were passionate about art or music, and the opportunities provided by those programs kept them in school and expanded their horizons.

Recent cuts to sports, music, and arts programs have had a negative impact on the creativity, collaborative abilities, and critical thinking skills of our students. Worst of all, these cuts have removed critical footholds that keep students in school and out of trouble.

To reverse these trends, we must move away from high-stakes testing, consider changes to the length of the school day and year, and finally address the budget woes that have been used as an excuse to slash programs across our educational system.

The cornerstone of my educational policy will be establishing a series of pediatric wellness centers in low-income communities across the city. These centers will take a multi-disciplinary approach, with educators – including arts instructors -- doctors, and parents working together to ensure that our students are ready to learn when they enter Kindergarten.

3. How, if at all, would you restructure the current system of school governance? How might this impact the delivery of arts instruction in city schools?

As Mayor, my schools Chancellor would be an educator and a skilled administrator. One of my top priorities is reorganizing early education programs under one agency, a Department of Early Learning, to better coordinate and share resources among schools and early education centers. The data is clear that student success in STEM subjects, especially in high-poverty schools, is enhanced by arts education. I would like to see early childhood art and music programs included in that reorganization and in pediatric wellness centers.

4. The arts are recognized as a core subject area here in New York and at the federal level. However, while many schools in New York City do provide quality arts instruction, access to this instruction is far from universal. How would you ensure equity in the delivery of arts education in the following key areas:

A. Funding: Principals consistently cite budget constraints as the chief obstacle to providing arts education at their schools. While schools receive “Supplemental Arts Funding” each year (formerly known as Project Arts), as of 2007 principals are not required to spend these funds directly on arts education. What would you do to ensure that every school in the city has the resources to provide every student with a quality education that includes the arts?

Clearly, principals should be required to spend Supplementary Arts Funding directly on arts education. It’s absurd that we designate funds for a specific purpose and do nothing to hold schools accountable to using them appropriately. The single biggest issue facing schools, however, is the overall lack of funding. I believe that by reducing bureaucratic morass at the DOE and better investing City pension funds, we can generate significant savings and direct a portion of them to education funding. Also, by simply improving the relationship between the administration and teachers, we can prevent the tragic loss of hundreds of millions of dollars in state and federal funding that resulted from failed contract negotiations.

We should also seriously pursue private funding for public arts programs. New York is fortunate to have a high concentration of arts benefactors who strongly believe in the value of an arts education. Any private funds must be distributed across the entire school system and shared across the diversity of arts programs.

B. Qualified Instructors: Highly qualified certified arts teachers are the cornerstone of a quality arts program in schools. However, whether due to budget constraints, school size, or other factors, almost 20% of city schools have no certified arts instructor on staff. How could the city ensure that all of our public school students receive instruction from qualified instructors?

There are several smart strategies for putting our limited resources to maximum use. First, we should continuously work to identify and train current non-arts teachers that have the interest and potential to become certified arts instructors. Second, we should work with the CUNY system and private universities to prepare students who intend to become teachers to undertake coursework and training to serve as certified arts instructors. Third, we should implement a program within education networks to share arts teachers across multiple schools, specifically targeting them to sites that lack quality arts education.

C. Space: Lack of available in-school arts space is one of the top challenges principals face in implementing arts education. What policies would you implement to prevent the loss of arts spaces in public schools due to overcrowding, co-location, or other factors?

I have serious concerns about the impact that charter co-locations have on space for public school programs. I would work with private partners to help fund the maintenance of existing arts spaces where feasible. I would also engage with community education centers and arts institutions to provide space outside of public school buildings where students could engage the arts in after-school programs.

D. Partnerships: New York City has a rich array of cultural resources, including arts and cultural institutions and professional artists that play an important role in the lives and education of some of our school children. How would you ensure that all public school students and their families could enjoy meaningful engagement with these resources?

I will direct my Department of Cultural Affairs to directly work with neighborhood arts and cultural partners to provide workshops, excursions, and in- and after-school activities for students and their parents across the five boroughs. While major arts institutions will certainly play a role, I believe that it is pivotal to engage local partners and artists so that schools that may not have a major institution nearby can still provide students with quality exposure to the arts.

5. The city's accountability system places a heavy emphasis on student performance on state assessments in English language arts and math. Currently, performance assessments for the arts are being piloted in city schools and while the arts can potentially factor into a high school's report card grade, the overall impact is minimal. Are there ways you would consider expanding or revising the school accountability system to incorporate the arts?

In addition to existing federal grants to develop proper arts assessments, I would seek funding from private funders to develop the technology and establish long-term support for assessing student performance in the arts. The current, one-size-fits-all approach to student assessment has proven ineffective and counterproductive.

6. How would you engage teachers, parents, the arts and cultural community, city agencies, and other interested stakeholders to expand access to arts education both in-school and outside of the school day?

After years of a top-down, my-way-or-the-highway management of our schools, I plan to introduce a collaborative approach that gives parents, educators, thought leaders, community partners, and private funders a strong voice in improving our schools. As mentioned, I believe we can address arts teaching certification and broad access to arts activities if we have all hands on deck. Initiatives like the Harlem Children's Zone have proven that community engagement can drastically improve outcomes for students across academic programs, including the arts.

Additional comments?

No additional comments.

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