

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: Bill DeBlasio

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?

The diversity of New York City is a treasure – and an important reason why my wife Chirlane and I decided to raise our kids here. One of the more obvious manifestations of that diversity is in the treasure of art, music, dance and theatre that we can find – even within walking distance of our home in Brooklyn. The arts can bring meaning to life – inspiration and hope – laughter and tears. What better place than New York City – with hundreds of languages, nationalities and cultures – to experience all of that.

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?

It's time to reduce the emphasis on high-stakes testing in our public schools and ensure that we have room in the school day for kids to get a well-rounded education. My wife, Chirlane, and I didn't send our kids to public schools in this city to become great test-takers. We sent them to learn how to think, how to explore the world, and unlock the potential of their creativity.

While we need mechanisms for measuring student progress, the gathering of information has costs – not only economic costs, but also academic costs, as time spent on test preparation can result in a narrowing of school curricula to exclude areas such as art, music and other enrichment activities. Ensuring that every child in every school receives a well-rounded education can't happen until we stop making everything – school progress reports, teacher evaluations and more – so dependent on the results of a limited range of standardized tests. Then we can work to achieve a curriculum that is balanced and does not cut critical areas like arts, music and other creative pursuits.

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?

I support mayoral control, but believe that we need more engagement from parents in deciding what's best for our children's education. I can say without reservation, as a public school parent, that the Bloomberg administration has shut us out. We have got to bring parents to the table and treat them like stakeholders if we hope to make more progress in our schools. Mayoral control shouldn't mean you go it alone and stop listening.

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?

When I served in the City Council, I was a sponsor of Resolution 837, which called upon the DOE to maintain a minimum level of arts funding in public schools.

We must open up the DOE budget to the public. Increased budget accountability will help us to root out wasteful and unnecessary DOE expenditures, and maximize funding for areas like arts education.

Moreover, relieving the pressure on principals to put so much emphasis on testing will lead to budget decisions at the school-level that better reflect the goal of a well-rounded education that develops creative and critical thinking.

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?

We can begin to address the shortage of qualified arts instructors by rethinking the emphasis on high-stakes testing.

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?

Like the issue of arts instructors, space issues can be more rationally resolved after taking some of the craziness out of the testing regime – that has distorted curricular goals. Moreover, we need a much more thoughtful approach to co-locations that too often are made without adequate input from parents and other community stakeholders.

Finally, schools should grow with the community, and not reduce space for arts and other activities due to overcrowding. We must plan proactively for the impact that residential development will have on schools.

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?

It is time to re-think the relationship between New York City and its public schools. The relationship between public schools and the City as a whole should be a two-way street— this means bringing New York City’s diverse set of assets into schools, and helping schools become active participants in New York City life and culture. Schools should be forward-thinking centers of innovation that propel New York City into the future through our students and their engagement with the world. We must draw on New York City’s unparalleled resources to turn our schools into integral parts of our City’s economic, intellectual and cultural landscape, and we must create schools that will graduate students who are ready to face challenges of the future.

New York City public schools are situated amidst a rich, vibrant network of opportunities for engaging students in creative thought and enriching learning experiences. These should be proactively integrated into the learning process, both inside and outside of the classroom.

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?

Absolutely. School Progress reports include a very limited set of information and can be confusing to parents. School Progress reports include a very limited set of information and can be confusing to parents. Including factors such as compliance with State arts education requirements and other indicators about arts in schools would help to provide parents with a more accurate and useful understanding of how schools are serving students.

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?

Parents provide the support needed for students to attend school each and every day and to be motivated to achieve their highest potential. As a public school parent, I know our City can do more to involve families in their children’s education. It is ultimately in the interest of our public schools to increase parent engagement. Parents who are informed, supported, and included in important conversations about education will help to empower educators, strengthen our schools, and increase accountability. I will work to increase parent engagement through a variety of strategies including monthly Borough Education Forums, working with Superintendents offices to increase their presence in the community and better engage families, and increasing parent involvement through new and innovative use of internet resources, such as webcasting PTA and CEC meetings.

Additional comments?

No additional comments.

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