

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: John Liu

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?

I am a proud graduate of the New York City public school system. Fortunately, I was able to attend a variety of art classes in my time at those schools. As a naturally quantitative thinker, I benefited from using the more creative side of my brain in those classes.

The benefits of arts instruction inspired me to enroll in music and writing classes as a student at SUNY-Binghamton. While I was a Mathematical Physics major, my exposure to arts and humanities helped me maintain a balance in my studies. Those classes taught me to reason, collaborate, discuss and use different perspectives. The different approach I learned in those classes allowed me to develop creative solutions to seemingly intractable problems.

While at SUNY-Binghamton, as president of an student Asian cultural group, I helped to arrange and co-sponsor many cultural events for campus. Among some of these events were an Asian cultural festival, a "China Night" performance for the Lunar New Year, and working with the Museum of Chinese in America, I was able to help bring a traveling exhibit to SUNY-Binghamton.

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?

In recent years, our schools have become test preparation factories and have been less successful at providing a broad education to our children. This emphasis on testing, combined with budget shortfalls, has unfortunately pushed art and other disciplines out of the curriculum. I believe that an over-zealous focus on quantitative metrics intended to track the progress of teachers and students has made it hard to demonstrate the concrete value of arts and social sciences. This is 'teaching to the test' to an extreme. Because the skills are hard to test, schools have stopped teaching the skills. Of course this is a significant loss because an understanding of arts and social sciences is essential if we are to tackle the challenges of the future. Students should have a balanced education and they should learn the skills of reason, collaboration and creative problem solving.

On a broader note – if children are not exposed to art at a young age, they will be less likely to appreciate art as adults. We should not be robbing them of those important experiences.

The New York City school curriculum can be expanded by taking an emphasis away from rote testing and by finding other ways to evaluate the value of an education. Students should be seen in a more holistic manner and not simply the sum of a series of tests.

It will also make sense to create incentives for schools to place priority on arts and other subjects. For instance, an annual City-wide contest in the arts that will offer students the opportunity to display their work at one of New York's world renowned art galleries could inspire our next Roy Lichtenstein. There is no limit to finding ways to make the arts and humanities more relevant in our system. But we must start by evaluating our students and their education in a new way.

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?

Earlier this year my office published a report related to school governance - "No More Rubber Stamp - Reforming New York's Panel For Education Policy". In the report I offer recommendations that would create a more collaborative structure and one that is more responsive to the community. The mayor and the chancellor would retain a large degree of authority and decision-making power in this system, but there would be important new components in place by which the public will be able to participate, be heard, and have influence.

While the outward appearance of the Panel for Education Policy would be the same, the manner in which they are selected would allow for more input from the public at large. The Mayoral appointees would be selected from a PEP Nominating Committee that would be made up of elected officials, community, labor and education leaders. This would result in a PEP that represents the community and is not simply a mayoral rubber stamp.

This would likely alter the delivery of all instruction at the Department of Education, including the arts and humanities. If the leadership of the PEP prioritized arts education and the manner in which it was taught, the DOE would make the appropriate changes.

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?

The first place to start would be to make sure that at least a percentage, if not all, of Supplemental Arts Funding is used to directly fund arts education.

The second step is to take a broad look at the City budget and the DOE's budget in particular and make appropriate changes. Again, I will point you to a report produced by my office last year that argued that investments in education would be the smartest strategy for New York City in terms of fiscal returns, economic development and quality of life improvements. "Beyond High School - Higher Education as a Growth and Fiscal Strategy for New York City", makes the case for investing in education but unfortunately does not offer a funding panacea. After recognizing the paramount importance of education, the next step is to make those difficult budget decisions that will get adequate funding for education initiatives.

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?

This can be achieved through a few of the items mentioned above. First, by evaluating schools and the value of education in more holistic manner, schools will be given the impetus to revalue arts education.

Second, reforming the governance structure in a way that represents the community will help ensure that schools are teaching the curriculum that communities value. If the community collectively values education in the arts and humanities, as I think that it will, schools will prioritize that learning.

Third, a broad look at the City's budget and DOE's in particular will change the allotment of resources in a way that will result in greater investment in education and ultimately greater resources.

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?

Overcrowding has gotten worse under the current administration because of its emphasis on allowing charter schools to take space in public schools. I would immediately stop this practice and begin collecting rent from charter schools that are co-located. I will work to ensure the success of existing public schools by giving them adequate resources, rather than inhibit them by reducing their available space.

Additionally, I believe that there is room here for creative collaboration with our schools and our world renowned arts and humanities institutions. With the world's richest collection of arts museums, cultural centers and humanities non-profits there are endless possibilities to collectively address the shortage of space for arts education.

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?

As mentioned above, there are unexplored opportunities to connect arts education with the rich arts and cultural resources within the City. As space is such a premium in New York City, one simple idea is to find productive partnerships between institutions with arts expertise and schools that have space during non-school hours.

However, the best place to start these partnerships is to have the Department of Cultural Affairs work with the Department of Education to identify all of the community-based and other arts organizations/artists within a school district and provide this list to Principals so that they know about these additional resources for their schools. I am confident that putting these groups together will result in many creative collaborations.

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?

I think it is important for our students to have a balanced education. The arts develop our students creativity and individuality and I would work to make performance assessments for the arts weigh more in evaluating a high school.

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?

As mentioned above, I would start with an overall look at the City's budget and DOE's in particular and make greater investments in education. With this investment will be a reformed governance structure that is more inclusive of the community and will result in schools teaching to the values of the public.

Additionally, creative collaborations between the rich array of arts and cultural institutions and artists in New York City and our schools will result in student body that is engaged with the arts during and after school, and an arts community that benefits from working with our next generation. There is simply no excuse for the world's cultural capital to not have the highest quality and most accessible arts instruction.

Additional comments?

Arts and the humanities are an important component of a balanced education. Creative and collaborative thinking is essential for tackling the challenges of the future.

I currently have a son in the City's public schools and have seen first hand the inadequacy of arts education. When I was a child, I was fortunate enough to have piano lessons that helped me to appreciate the arts. While I was able to take these lessons, many current New York City students do not have this opportunity. A New York City education should provide all students with a meaningful exposure to the arts.

**View all the responses from
candidates online at nycartsed.org!**