

THE GREAT RECESSION OF 2007 TO 2009: ITS IMPACT ON FUNDING AND PERCEPTIONS OF THE VALUE OF ARTS EDUCATION BY SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS IN THE BOROUGH OF MANHATTAN, NEW YORK CITY

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes how the great recession of 2007 to 2009, in the view of school administrators, impacted funding during and after the recession, teacher availability, and perceptions of the value of arts education by parents, superiors, colleagues and the Board of Education in the Borough of Manhattan of New York City. The study is qualitative and includes data from interviews and surveys completed by school administrators from 13 of the 24 schools designated in Manhattan as Center for Arts Education partners. Administrators showed mixed views on the impact of the recession on budgets during the recession; some perceived a negative impact and others perceived no impact. This parallels actual arts education funding which went up 5% and down 4% in 2008-09 and 2009-10. The total City education budget showed no decreases during this time though increases softened. Arts education teacher availability was not impacted. Most felt the recession hurt their ability to gain arts education funds after the recession. They split about 50-50 on whether the recession had a negative impact on the perceived value of arts education after the recession. They overwhelmingly felt that the School Board moved toward a view that arts education was of less value during the recession. Colleagues were viewed to move to more of a negative view and superiors were viewed to move toward a more positive view. The most striking change in the perception of school administrators was the stronger position of parents as advocates for arts education during the recession.

INTRODUCTION

According to the National Bureau of Economic Research (Bram, Orr, Rich, Rosen and Song, 2009), the United States entered into an economic recession in December 2007. Later in the fall season of 2008, the condition of the U.S. economy rapidly deteriorated; but then finally leveled off in July 2009 (Bram, et al., 2009). The crisis that led to the country's economic downturn was the collapse and failure of several of the biggest financial institutions in the U.S. including Bear Stearns, Fannie Mae, Freddie Mac, Lehman Brothers, Washington Mutual and American International Group (AIG), plus the unforeseeable difficulties in the automobile industry (Billiteri, 2008).

During this economic crisis, the state and local government sectors across the nation scrambled to fill budget gaps by reducing their funding expenditures. A *budget gap*, according to Bradbury (2010), is defined as “*the means of requirement for the states to balance their budget in order to avoid deficit.*” Even with the relief funds from the federal government in the form of a stimulus package via the *American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA)*, the monetary assistance just partly cushioned the recession-induced shortfalls in many states and local governments’ budget gaps (Bradbury, 2010). To accomplish this task, states and local administrations responded by implementing certain measures, such as increasing tax rates, drawing down reserves and/or cutting entitlement programs, which included education - particularly arts education programs.

Under the tenure of the current and past Presidents of the U.S., the education sector has always been an important part of the country’s budgetary expenditures and the support for the sector holds one of the highest priorities in every administration. In the past five decades, reform after reform has been explored. Arts educator Fowler (1989) reiterated in the report, *A Nation at Risk in 1983*, that most reforms intensified the study of English, Mathematics, Science and History, often at the expense of Arts Education programs.

The recent 2008 recession federal stimulus package, unfortunately, is slowly shrinking due to the indolent recovery of the economy. Many states’ school districts are ultimately tapping from the separate 10 billion dollars Education Jobs Fund, also known as “*edujobs*,” designated to help states gradually recovers from the deep recession (McNeil, 2011). An outcome of the recession has been very limited and practically no funding in support of arts education programs.

Nationwide, the challenge for the states is to sustain their arts education programs (Nygren, 2003). The economic downturn has led to a massive reduction in spending by the publicly funded school districts, which resulted in lay-offs of thousands of teachers and support staff plus the partial elimination of school curriculums (Coddington, 2010). The problem within the public schools districts is the decline of their arts education programs. In many cases, arts programs were among the first to go (Coddington, 2010). As Fowler has reiterated (1989, p. 92), “*all too often, arts are assigned the lowest priority.*” While the majority of the relief funds went to help the education sector, at nearly 75 percent, the funding priority went to math, reading, writing and other subjects while funding for arts education declined (Norton, 2008).

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

According to Remer (2010, p.81), “*arts education has always been difficult to define, perhaps now more than ever.*” To complicate the matters further, labels such as *arts as education*, *arts in education*, *arts for education*, *arts aesthetic education*, *arts for integration* and *arts for learning* disarrange the landscape (Remer, 2010). With different tags attached to the concept, the question for arts educators is how to present an intriguing argument that will embrace what arts education is.

Heilburn and Gray (2001) have echoed the *four perennial views* of Charles Fowler’s (1988) argument in his book entitled, *Can We Rescue the Arts for America’s Children?* First, there is no agreement as to which art discipline should be taught. The list includes dance, drama, design, film, creative writing, poetry, and assorted craft. What should be offered? Second, there is a question of who ought to teach the classes. Should they be taught by the classroom teacher or an art specialist? Third, with the increasing diverse minority groups in the U.S., whose cultural traditions are to be taught so not to neglect other cultures? Fourth, should arts course emphasize creating art or appreciating it? (Fowler, in Heilburn and Gray, 2001)

Today, the nationwide school system has adopted a general view of what constitutes the standard goal of arts education. Arts education is to develop a knowledge base among the four arts disciplines – dance, music, theater, and visual arts – as put-in-place during the Clinton administration [in 1994] set forth under the National Standards Core Curricula (Berube, 1999).

The arts education programs in public schools have gone through unpredictable cycles of funding sources from individuals, corporations, foundations, and federal, state, and local governments. Even before the recession, Federal arts spending was cut by 2 percent; the reasoning behind the cut, arguably, was partly due to the policy makers and administrators “*still see arts as a frill or, at best, something that needs to be justified*” (Bresler, 1998 p.13)

While the administration under G.W. Bush recognized the importance and equal billing of arts together with math and reading, other empirical works have demonstrated that high-stakes testing legitimized a culture that sacrifices resources and time for arts education in the name of standards (Cavanagh, 2006; *Center on Educational Policy*, 2006; McNeil and Valenzuela, 2001). The move to standardized testing imposed high-stakes on accountability through testing in mathematics and language arts (Heilig, Cole, Aguilar, 2010) which motivated school administrators to shift their attention away from arts education.

Policy makers in Congress have continually questioned the spending of millions of dollars on the only arts inclined federal agency [NEA]. This appears contrary to the views of parents. A Harris Poll conducted in 2005 (Paige and Huckabee, 2005) among 90 respondents, showed that the arts are considered vital to a well-rounded education for all students; and that nine in ten parents of school-age children opposed budget cutbacks on arts programs (Paige and Huckabee, 2005).

With funding initiatives in arts education such as *Goals 2000 Arts Education Partnership*, a renewed interest in the arts education funding has emerged (Bresler, 1998). The NEA initiative, *Arts in Education Program*, created in the mid-1980s funneled funds into school system arts education programs throughout the U.S. to promote arts to children and young adults (Smith, 1995). The current controversial legislation mandate, *No Child Left Behind*, has increased additional federal funding to those schools “*in need of improvement*” (Mantel, 2005) but holds those school accountable for raising the achievement level of all students in two years’ time and no focus on arts education.

Given the budgetary constraints in the federal education reform plus the recent economic downturn [2007 to 2009 recession], states and localities all across the nation, including New York State, are facing with a cutback in appropriations to their arts education programs. Even with the additional funding from *American Recovery and Reinvestment Act* [ARRA] to help cope with the recession budget gap, funding the much needed school arts education programs is the challenge that most or all states and localities across the country are facing today.

In New York City, the fiscal funding crisis in the delivery of arts education programs to hundreds of public schools has its roots in the City’s bankruptcy in the mid-1970s (Berube, 1999). The funding initiative created in 1992 by the Annenberg Foundation, which led to the creation of a nonprofit organization called *The Center for Arts Education*, has helped toe the staggering arts education programs in the public schools (Fineberg, 1997). Fineberg (1997) asks -- can the arts-deprived students of the nation’s largest school get their due - instruction in music, art, dance and drama – as well as exposure to the cultural centers of the arts’ capital world? Fineberg believes that the children of New York’s public school can have an “*opportunity to stretch their creative potential to its limits*” (Fineberg, 1997, p. 33).

With the 12 million dollars set aside by the Annenberg Foundation, the initiative called the *Annenberg Challenge* dared other philanthropic entities to match its grant with two dollars for every Annenberg dollar, thereby raising the stakes to 36 million dollars (Fineberg, 1997). The funding of *Challenge Arts*, between 1996 through 2002, raised the expectations for not just New York City public schools students but also the students around the country (*Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University*, 2003). The generous grants from the Annenberg Foundation came rather at a time [in 1995] during development of the national standards and assessments debates about the effects of arts education; thus, creating national attention throughout the nation (Fineberg, 1997).

During the period of the *Annenberg Challenge* project, the newly created nonprofit organization called *The Center for Arts Education* (CAE), as stipulated in the initiative, was held accountable in the distribution of the 12 million dollars grant obtained from the Annenberg Foundation. This challenge grant created an opportunity for New York City public schools to apply for partnership grants between individual schools and cultural organizations to use the arts as catalysts for whole-school curriculum change or reform. This resulted in an increased thrust and surge in arts education directly serving more than 54,000 students in most Manhattan inner cities public schools (Fineberg, 1997).

In addition to the funding initiative from the Annenberg Foundation, the former mayor of City of New York, Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, added an additional funding [in 1997] of 75 million dollars. The funding initiative of the project called *Project Arts* (Arts Restoration through the Schools) came from the Board of Education (Moskowitz, 2003). During the period of the *Annenberg Challenge* and *Project Arts* [1996 through 2002], arts education reached a peak throughout New York City's public school system.

Unfortunately, the decade of progress in arts education reform in New York City's public school system came and went. The *Annenberg Challenge* fund had been depleted and the once known New York City's *Project Arts* was replaced by *ArtsCounts* where accountability and metrics measurements are the centerpiece of the new arts education initiative -- formed by the New York City Department of Education in 2007 (Israel, October 2009)

According to Israel (June 2011), the decline in arts budgets in the past several years has forced principals and administrators to make a very difficult decisions regarding the allocation of education dollars. Even before the onset of the fiscal crisis in 2008, the funding decline in arts education can be traced to a set of educational policies initiated by administrative decisions that did not give priority to arts education.

Lincoln Kirstein [an impresario, writer and one of the founders of a well-known cultural center, the *Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts*] once described, in his essay, how our society dealt with arts and culture (Kierstein, 1978 p. 194), "*in the United States, our prime complaint is not what we do, or how it is done, but how little we have for what we might do.*"

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study is to analyze the impact of the economic downturn of the Great Recession of 2007 to 2009 on arts education funding, teacher availability, and perceptions of the value of arts education by the parents, superiors, colleagues, and the Board of Education in the Borough of Manhattan of New York City. The study uses a qualitative research methodology where perceptions and reactions are explored through interviews and when interviews were not possible, with a survey.

The study focuses on the two budget years during the recession (2008-2009 and 2009-2010) and the first budget year following the recession (2010-2011). The recession began in December, 2007 but the 2008-09 budget was set on April 17, 2008, just a few months after the recession officially began. The full impact of the recession was not felt until the fall of 2008, making the 2009-2010 budget the first budget that would be made with full knowledge of it. The recession officially ended in July of 2009. The City's education budget for 2010-11 was set on February 8, 2010, at a time when the recession was still being felt though officially over. For comparison purposes, the study presents budget data for 2007-08, 2008-09, 2009-2010, and 2010-11

As a qualitative study, this study seeks to find answers to problem statements and not support for specific hypotheses. While the focus is on New York City Borough of Manhattan schools with substantial arts education priorities, the questions which the study seeks to answer are generic to all public school systems in the United States. They are:

Problem 1: Did the Great Recession of 2007 to 2009 impact funding and staffing for arts education during or after the recession?

Problem 2: Did the Great Recession of 2007 to 2009 alter perceptions of the value of arts education on the part of the Board of Education, parents, superiors, and colleagues during the recession or its perceived overall value following the recession?

METHOD

The study relies upon qualitative data obtained in one-on-one semi-structured face-to-face interviews with arts education administrators. Surveys were mailed to schools where an interview was not possible. The respondents were interviewed for approximately 30 minutes as administrators had very limited time to participate in the study.

SUBJECTS

In the New York City Borough of Manhattan, 24 public schools are designated as Center for Arts Education partners. These schools are considered the lead schools in arts education in the City. Administrators of these schools were contacted to solicit their views. Given the very restricted access to school administrators that exists in New York City, the goal was to get the view of one administrator in each school. The targeted list of schools was obtained from *The Center for Arts Education* website where the schools had past and/or current arts education programs and were shown to have an affiliation with *The Center for Arts Education*.

In order to participate, the respondent had to be an administrator, director or principal of the school with knowledge about the school's arts education program, its budget, funding sources and human resources. Administrators were contacted by letter, follow-up phone calls, and email and asked to participate in an interview and, if unavailable, asked to complete a survey with the same questions asked during the interview. The goal was to seek the view of one administrator in each school. Thirteen administrators from 13 different schools provided responses either via survey or the interview resulting in 54.2% of the designated schools having representation in the study.

INTERVIEW AND SURVEY QUESTIONS

The interview was structured but allowed for open-ended response so additional clarification could be gained. The interview and the survey used the same questionnaire.

The questionnaire was divided into five sections geared to answering the problems posed by the study. It also asked if the school had an arts education program and a budget before, during, and after the recession. The questionnaire sections were (1) Existence of Prior/Current School Arts

Education Program and Budget (2) Impact of Recession on Arts Education Funding, (3) Impact of Recession on Perceived Value of Arts Education during the Recession, (4) Impact of Recession on Perceived Value of Arts Education following the Recession, and (5) Final Impressions.

The survey had one additional section at the beginning not included in the interview. That section asked the respondent to indicate their administrative position (e.g., Principal) and school category (e.g., K-8). This was not necessary in the interview as respondents were known. In the survey, all respondents were anonymous.

RESULTS

Answers to the questionnaire were collected either from the interview or through return of the survey via the mail or email. Of the 13 respondents, five were interviewed and eight returned a survey. All schools had an Arts Education Program during at least one year of the Great Recession. Of the 13 schools, 13 had a program in the budget years 2008-2009, 2009-2010, and 2010-2011 or for three of the four years considered in the study. Twelve had a program in all four years considered including the 2007-2008 budget year. The school that did not have a program in 2007-2008 did not have funding because it did not exist in 2007-2008. All respondents had budget responsibility for arts education in their school. Ten were principals, one was a vice-principal, and two were directors.

The first problem asks about the impact of the Great Recession on Arts Education funding and staffing. The recession was officially from December, 2007 through July, 2009. Budgets for New York City Public Schools are typically approved in February-May of the calendar year (e.g., March, 2008) and go into effect in July of that year for the next academic year (e.g., 2008-2009).

Figure 1 shows the public data on arts education funding for the New York City School System for the four budget years of 2007-2008 through 2010-2011 (New York City Board of Education, 2011). The budget information in figure 1 shows that there was no budget reduction for 2008-2009, the first year of the recession. Arts education funds actually increased by 5% for this budget year compared to 2007-2008.

By the budget years of 2009-2010 and 2010-2011, the recession began to take its toll on the arts education budget showing a lagged impact on the budgets. For these two periods, eight of the administrators, or 61.5%, felt funding was negatively impacted by the recession while five, or 38.5% felt there was no impact. As Figure 1 shows, the NYC Arts Education budget dropped by 4% in the second budget year of the recession (2009-2010) though a 1.3% increase materialized in the 2010-2011 budget year, the year after the recession.

The view by close to 2/3s of the administrators that funding decreased during these two years parallels the mixed outcomes shown in the published budget data. In 2009-10, there was a clear drop but in 2010-2011 there was a slight increase in funding.

Looking forward to the year after the recession, nine administrators or 69.2% felt the recession negatively affected the ability to gain funds following the recession with five of these administrators, or more than half, believing the recession had a very significant negative effect. An additional three believed the negative impact was moderate and only one felt the effect was less than moderate.

During the interviews, administrators noted that arts education continued to be a low priority in funding relative to mathematics and language arts during the recession and felt it could not

change much in priority because of pressures to show strong scores on standardized tests. With the continued high visibility of test score averages in these two areas, administrators did not expect any significant improvement in the near term or perhaps longer. Often, they noted that evaluations of their schools hinged almost entirely on their school averages in these two areas.

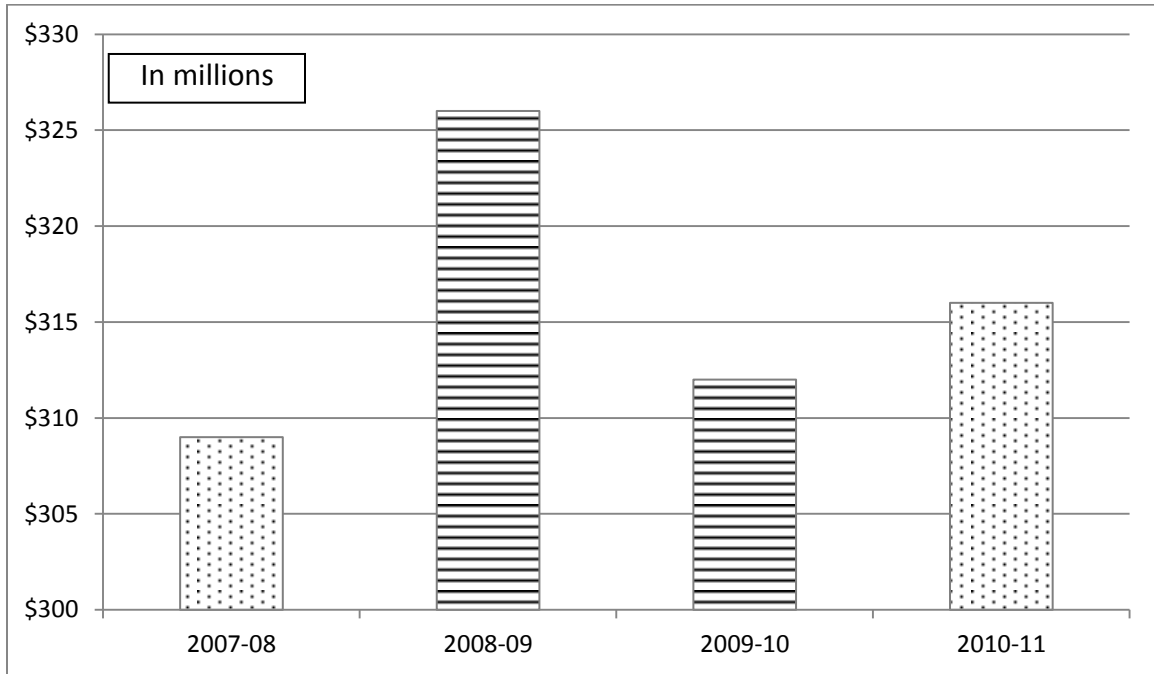


Figure 1: NYC Budgeted Funding for the Arts from 2007-08 through 2010-11.

It is useful to compare the trends for the total NYC Education Budget during this same time period to better understand what arts education administrators were experiencing. Figure 2 shows the public data on the New York City School System total approved budget for the four budget years 2007-2008 through 2010-11 (NYC Department of Education, 2008, April 30; NYC Department of Education, 2009, April 8; NYC Department of Education, 2010, March 24; NYC Department of Education, 2011, May5). New York City is the largest school system in the United State (Institute of Education Sciences National Center for Education Statistics, 2010) with a budget in the billions of dollars for education. Its budget for arts education is in the millions of dollars and a fractional percentage of its total budget. Over the four period considered, the average total budget for City education was \$17,957,255 (in millions) and the arts education average budget was \$316 (in millions), less than 1/10,000 of a % of the budget.

As shown in Figure 2, the NYC total budget for education climbed steadily from 2007-08 through 2010-11. For the first budget year in the recession (2008-09), the total budget increased by 4.55%. For the second budget year in the recession (2009-2010), the increases continued but dropped to an increase of 3.52%. By 2010-11, the first budget year following the official end of the recession, the increase of 1.18% was at its lowest level during this period.

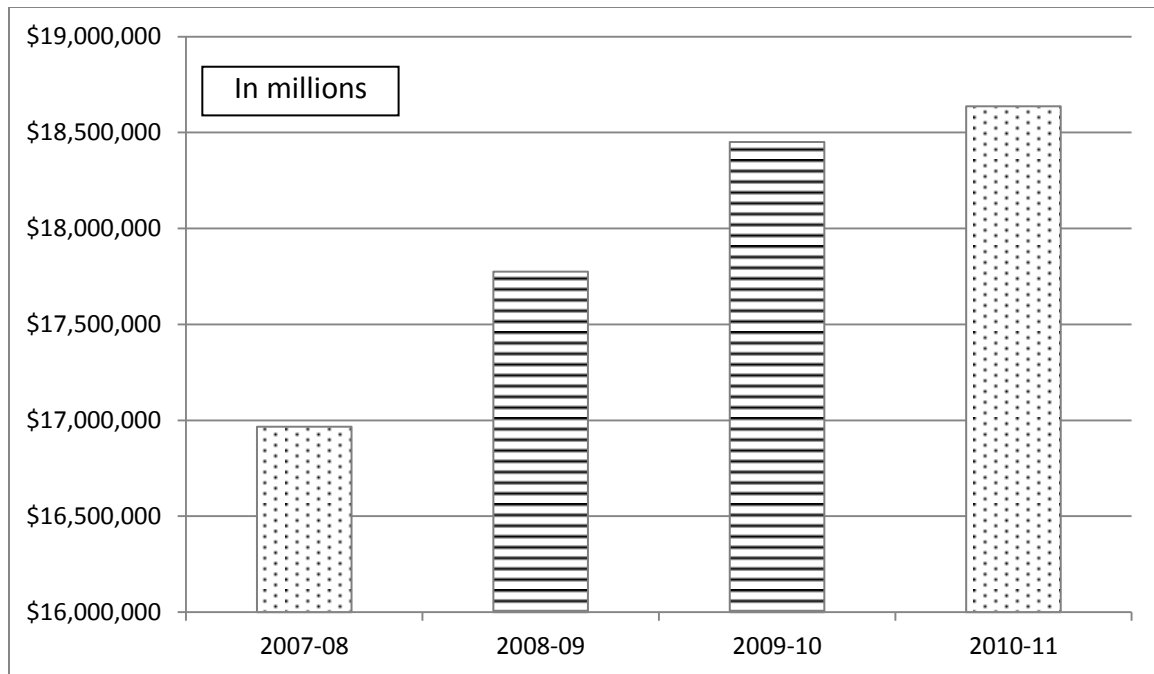


Figure 2: Total NYC Education School Year Budgets from 2007-08 through 2010-11.

Thus, it can be seen that the recession slowed increases in the total City education budget though no decrease in budget took place. Arts education funding showed a comparable increase to that of the City in the first year of the recession (2008-2009) but funding dropped in the second year of the recession (2009-2010). Arts education funding went up in an amount comparable to the overall increase for education in 2010-2011, at just over a 1% increase. This confirms that the mixed views of administrators regarding budget declines during the recession years and after relates to what actually happened to budgets.

Taken in context, it is clear that the arts education budget was hit hard in the second year of the recession and, given its small size it is understandable that administrators felt that the changes were very impactful and that arts education had not had any change in priority and maybe a reduction in priority.

For arts teacher availability during the recession in 2009-2010 or 2010-2011, there was a similar mixed response. Eight administrators, or 61.5%, felt there was no change, four, or 30.8%, felt there was a decrease in availability, and one felt there was an increase.

Thus, the answer to the first problem is: The Great Recession did not impact arts education budgets in the first year of the recession but had a lagged negative impact in the second year of the recession, 2009-2010 but by 2010-2011 there was a small increase in funding though nothing comparable to the sizable increase provided just before the recession. Looking to the first year following the recession, almost 70% of the administrators felt the recession had a negative impact on their ability to gain funds for arts education but generally they did not perceive a negative impact on arts education teacher availability during the recession.

The second problem asks whether the Great Recession altered perceptions of the value of arts education by key constituencies including the parents, superiors, colleagues, and the Board of

Education during the recession or its overall perceived value following the recession. Figure 3 shows how administrators perceived changes in attitudes during the recession for each group.

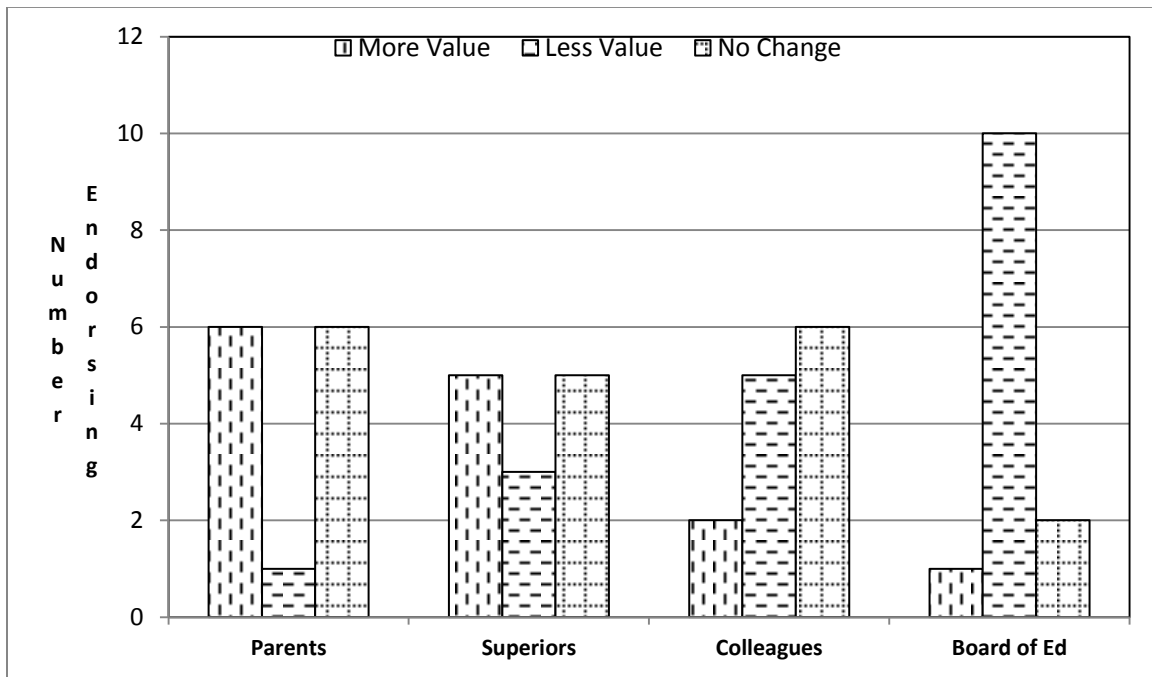


Figure 3: Number of administrators who perceived improved, worse, or no change in attitudes toward the value of arts education during the recession for parents, superiors, colleagues and the Board of Education.

The greatest change in attitude perceived by administrators during the recession was found for the Board of Education where 10 of 13 or 76.9% felt the Board moved to a view, during the recession, that arts education was of less value. While no change in the view of parents, superiors, and colleagues was perceived by 5-6 administrators, of those who perceived a change, more felt colleagues moved to a position of less value than more value. Colleagues were defined as administrators in other areas such as mathematics. In contrast, those who perceived a change felt superiors moved to perceiving arts education as having more value during the recession than less value.

For the seven administrators, or 53.8%, who perceived a change in parents' views, six felt parents moved, during the recession, to a perception of greater value for arts education and only one perceived that they moved to a position of less value. During the interviews added clarity to this change. Administrators expressed surprise that parents had become their greatest ally in gaining arts education funding and were grateful for their increase in support. They felt parents were an important, new, and needed ally for them as they sought increases in arts education funding. In particular, parents were especially interested in student performances, like dance and music, and the integration of visual arts, as in painting and drawing, within dance and music performances.

In their assessment of the impact of the recession on the perceived value of arts education following the recession, administrators showed a mixed response. Seven of 13 administrators, or 53.8%, felt the recession had a negative impact on perceptions of the overall value of arts education while six, or 46.2% perceived no negative impact. Four of the seven who perceived a

negative impact felt the impact of the recession was very negative while two felt it was moderately negative, with only one feeling it was only somewhat negative.

Thus, the answer to the second problem is: It was the perception of administrators that the Board of Education move to a more negative view of arts education value during the recession; colleagues also were felt to show more of negative shift toward arts education value than a positive one while the shift by superiors, when one was believed to occur, was felt to be more positive than negative; parents were felt to show the greatest shift to a view of the positive value of arts education, during the recession, of the constituencies considered and were considered the greatest new ally of administrators in gaining arts education funding. On changes in the perceived value of arts education following the recession, administrators were almost equally split with about half perceiving no negative change and another half believing there was negative change in the perceived value of arts education following the recession.

DISCUSSION

While this study is a qualitative one with a limited amount of data, the administrators represented more than half of the key arts education public schools in the New York City Borough of Manhattan. There was considerably consistency in their views on the recession. The Board of Education was clearly felt to have moved to a view, during the recession, that arts education was of less value and most felt that their ability to gain arts education following the recession was hurt by the recession. Also, there was consistency in the view that parents had moved to seeing arts education as of more value during the recession, for those who believed parents changed their views.

On actual funding, the views are mixed. Almost 2/3s felt there was a negative impact during the recession and 1/3 felt there was no impact on funding by the recession. This mix of views is likely due to actual funding which was mixed. There was a 5% increase in funding during the first year of the recession and a 4% decrease in the second year of the recession. The increase in the first year of the recession is most likely due to the momentum of the existing budget and no appreciation of the forthcoming depth and breadth of the recession. By the second year of the recession, views had changed. The total New York City education budget showed no budget cuts during this time though increases softened during the recession and after it.

During the interviews, it was clear that the recession did not affect the priority for funding. Arts management continued to have a low priority relative to mathematics and language. In part, this appeared to be due to the latter having stringent testing requirements which significantly affected evaluations for the schools and their administrators. It is far more common for administrators to be perceived to have a failing school from problems in mathematics and language arts than from problems in arts education where standardized testing plays no significant role in school evaluations. Administrators continued to feel that arts education was important but that it could not change in priority because of pressures to show strong scores on standardized tests.

The total New York City education budget over the four years considered averaged \$17,957,255 (in millions) and the arts education average budget averaged \$316 (in millions), less than 1/10,000 of a % of the budget. Thus, the belief that arts education did not have a priority in the budget process clearly related to the actual budget dollars allocated to it.

The most striking change in the perception of school administrators who managed arts education in schools with a significant arts education mission was their belief that parents moved a more positive view of the value of arts education during the recession. Administrators felt that parents were an important, new, and needed ally as they sought increases in arts education funding. In

particular, parents were especially interested in student performances, like dance and music, and the integration of visual arts, as in painting and drawing, within dance and music performances. Therefore, the study is consistent with evidence from a Harris Poll conducted in 2005 (Paige and Huckabee, 2005) that showed nine in ten parents of school-age children support arts education programs.

It is hoped that this study can open up a conversation and promote further study on the importance of arts education not just in New York City public schools but in schools around the nation. This type of study is important as it sheds light on the competing forces affecting arts education funding as seen by those who must ask for and allocate scarce arts education funds. Views of administrators are not readily available for many reasons including an understandable reluctance to speak about the issues.

While candid, the views of these administrators are not unexpected, inconsistent with the factual data on budgets, or overwhelmingly negative. The study shows that parents can play an important role in helping administrators gain more funding for arts education. Administrators in other parts of the nation may wish to consider the value of parents in their search for more arts education funds perceived by administrators in New York City public schools as they seek support in their search for more funding.

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