

The Kids Are Alright

New Urban Arts brings more than the arts to Providence high school students



New Urban Arts executive director Daniel Schleifer

While the pandemic took a toll on the already fragile mental health of many teenagers, New Urban Arts remained a lifeline to the high school students enrolled in their after-school arts program. Even virtually, it continued to offer students the mentor- and ally-ships that have been its hallmark for over 25 years.

“New Urban Arts is a welcoming space that offers flexible ways [for students] to engage,” explains executive director Daniel Schleifer. “Art is the hook to get them in the door. We give them an opportunity to make investments that go beyond the arts.”

Schleifer points to their robust post-secondary advising program, A Life After School, as an example. It starts as early as sophomore year, when students begin envisioning their post-high school future with New Urban Arts’ resident artist mentors, who then help connect students to summer pre-college programs. For seniors, New Urban Arts arranges regional college visits; they help students navigate the application and financial aid processes and assist them in narrowing down school choices. They also work with the students to make wise financial decisions around college, such as looking at debt-to-income ratios.

The program doesn’t end when the students head off to school. It continues to follow and help students overcome hurdles that occur throughout the college experience. The vast majority are first-generation college students. For kids who aren’t college bound, New Urban Arts helps secure apprenticeships or helps them navigate post-high school life and gap years.

For Dana Heng, a former student

who returned as a resident artist mentor, New Urban Arts was responsible for the development of her creative career as a visual artist. “My family was encouraging even though they didn’t have the resources or know-how to foster it,” she says, noting it was a cousin who recommended the program. “The first day of high school [at Classical], I crossed the street and barged in while the staff was having a meeting. The programs don’t start until October.” Heng laughs. “They gave me a registration form.”

The studio is drop-in and student led, and the staff is trained in youth work and restorative justice as well as the myriad of issues that teens face today - from relationships to gender identity to drug use.

“We take our cues from the students,” Heng says. “Some want to talk about boys, some want to talk about art.” Art can range from the technical (“show me how to paint”) to more experiential. “The core thing we are building is trust. Art is a vehicle for that. It keeps the hands busy while talking.”

“There is a small but consistent body of academic research that shows the arts as the most effective at promoting a variety of positive academic, emotional, and social outcomes,” says Schleifer. He cites a 2021 EdVestors study that analyzed a decade’s worth of data and showed Boston’s public school system saw an increase in student performance, higher attendance rates, and better parental engagement when they reintroduced an arts curriculum.

Arts-ed cuts are typically most severe in low-income neighborhoods and communities of color. “Twenty-five years ago, Providence Public Schools had 150 arts teachers. It’s just under 40 now,” Schleifer points out. The reasons are complex, particularly with the pandemic taking a sizable chunk from an already limited public education budget. These finite resources must flow to academics.

Photo courtesy of New Urban Arts

Resident artist mentor
Dana Heng



"We're here to fill a gap for the young people we serve."

Mentors like Heng are the lifeblood of their program. Unlike volunteer staff that changes year-to-year, resident artist mentors are paid staff members, providing a needed consistency for the students that fosters a sense of trust. "If we are an arts organization, we've got to employ artists," says Schleifer, who was able to diversify the teaching staff by offering

paid opportunities.

This pivot turned out to be fortuitous. When COVID hit, New Urban Arts had to put their volunteer program on hold. But they upheld their mission remotely through the shut-downs with their cohort of paid artist mentors. Schleifer's quick to note they are not immune to skyrocketing inflation. "Our biggest challenge is maintaining funding."

While countless studies point to the

advantages of arts learning for students, for mentor Heng, the lessons that New Urban Arts imparts aren't necessarily tangible. "The biggest impact is helping students find agency in the world. Knowing you can make choices and be an active participant in your own life, the opportunities out there are infinite."

New Urban Arts celebrates 25 years with an October gala at the Providence Art Club. NewUrbanArts.org

Photo courtesy of New Urban Arts