



# Designing for Engagement

## How High-Quality Arts OST Programs Can Engage Tweens

Tracey Hartmann and Wendy McClanahan

Tweens—young people age 10 to 14—are notoriously difficult to engage and retain in out-of-school time (OST) programs. As youth age, they have more responsibilities and options after school. They also have more autonomy than younger children, so they “vote with their feet” when a program does not interest them.

When it launched the Youth Arts Initiative (YAI) with funding from the Wallace Foundation in 2014, Boys & Girls Clubs of America (BGCA) hoped this high-quality arts initiative would address the challenge of attracting and retaining tweens. Research from the first three years of the initiative suggests that it worked: Participants were highly engaged in YAI. This engagement translated into regular attendance: More than half the participants attended the program at least once a week, and two-thirds were retained in the program from year to year.

YAI participants also increased their Club attendance, while members who were not in YAI decreased their Club attendance. Furthermore, parents, staff, and participants themselves reported that YAI improved young people’s self-confidence and self-awareness and their ability to self-manage, persist, and develop new friendships.

This article shares findings from three years of implementation research about how and why YAI was successful in attracting and engaging tweens and about the benefits participants experienced. We

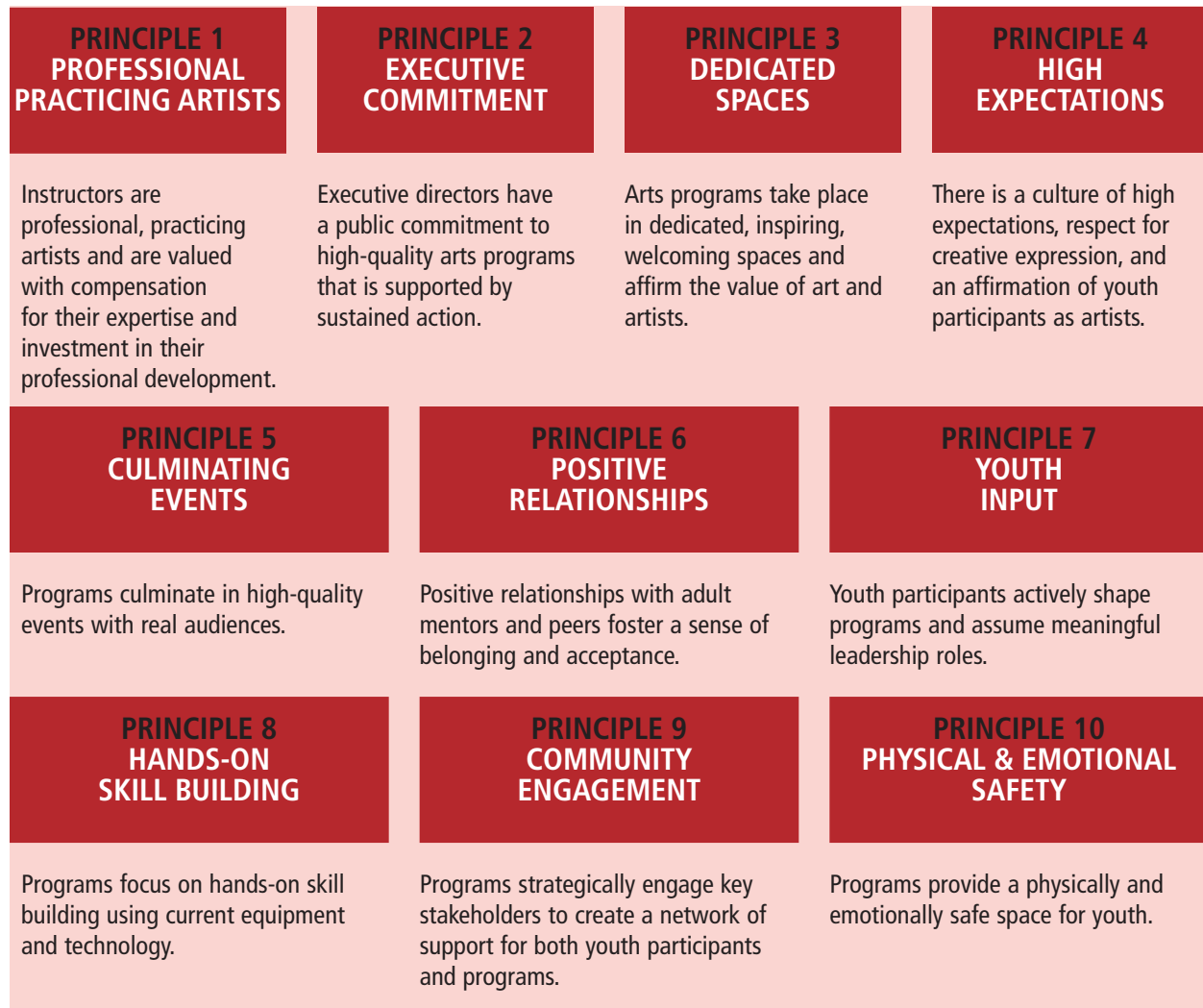
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**TRACEY HARTMANN**, PhD, is director of qualitative research at Research for Action, a mission-driven educational research non-profit organization. Dr. Hartmann has over 15 years of experience in implementation research and evaluation in K–12 education and out-of-school time.

**WENDY MCCLANAHAN**, PhD, is president and founder of McClanahan Associates, Inc., a research organization committed to “evaluation for progress.” She has over 20 years of evaluation experience, working extensively with initiatives designed to assist young people from vulnerable communities.

**Figure 1. The 10 Success Principles**

Source: Montgomery, Rogovin, & Persaud, 2013



begin by using the 10 success principles that define high-quality arts programs (Montgomery, Rogovin, & Persaud, 2013) to describe how YAI is different from arts programs typically offered in multiprogram afterschool settings. We then describe the YAI pilot and program structure before turning to the research findings. These findings lead to recommendations for the field on ways to engage tweens in arts programming.

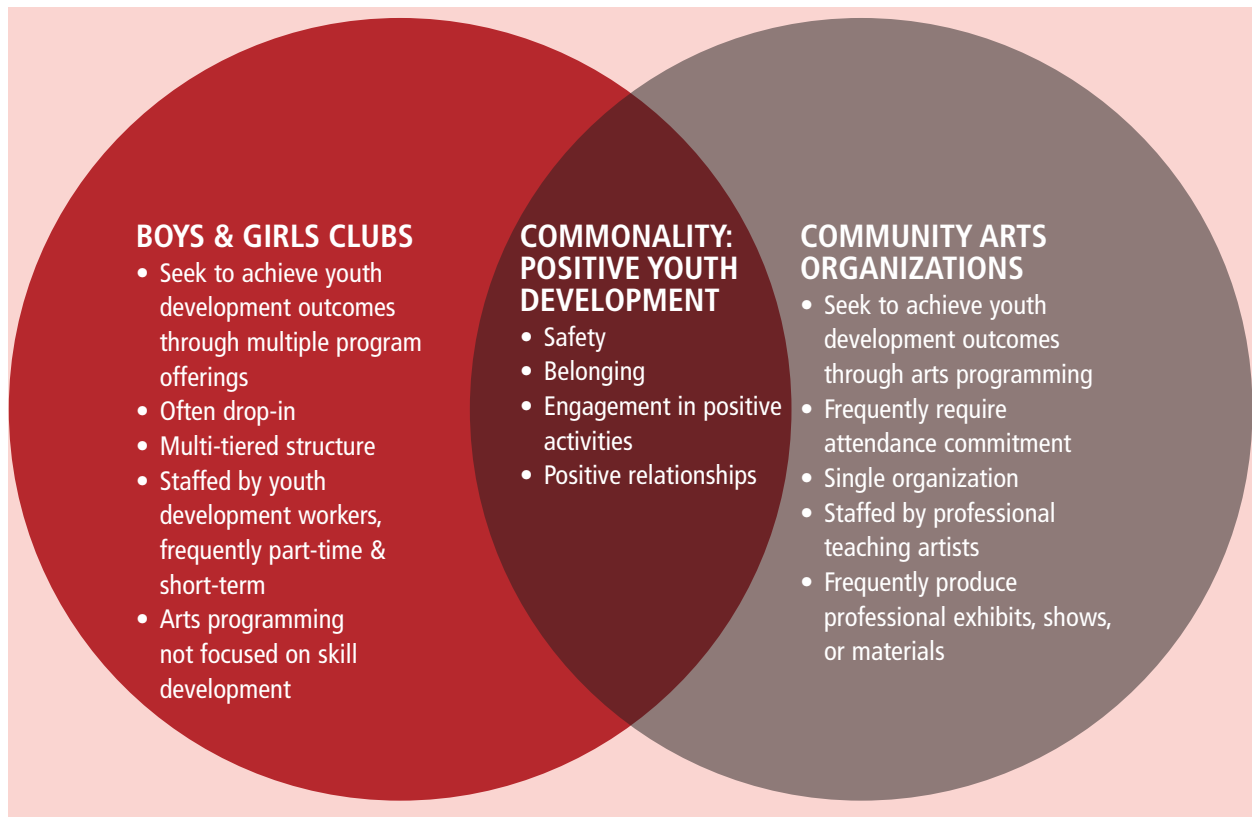
### **The Youth Arts Initiative and the 10 Success Principles for Arts Programs**

YAI's model is derived from a multiyear study of youth engagement in the arts called *Something to Say: Success Principles for Afterschool Arts Programs from Urban Youth and Other Experts* (Montgomery et

al., 2013). The study identified the 10 principles for implementing high-quality OST art skill-development programs displayed in Figure 1.

The 10 success principles were based partially on the experiences of art-focused organizations. YAI is based in Boys & Girls Clubs—that is, in multiprogram afterschool settings. Both kinds of organizations want youth to thrive socially, emotionally, and cognitively. Both have youth development at their core: They strive to create safe environments where young people can feel that they belong; engage in positive activities; and develop strong, supportive relationships with adults and peers. However, multiprogram and community arts organizations also differ in significant ways, as shown in Figure 2 and summarized below.

**Figure 2. Comparison of Boys & Girls Clubs and Community Arts Organizations**



**Breadth vs. depth.** Clubs strive for holistic youth development by providing multiple programs for participants to explore. Arts-focused organizations focus on holistic youth development through the arts.

**Open-access vs. selective participation.** Clubs are safe havens where youth can explore varying interests in a structured environment. Participation is voluntary, and participants are rarely turned away. Community arts programs, by contrast, try to make youth comfortable with taking risks. They frequently restrict enrollment to cohesive cohorts that their budgets can support. Because they focus on skill development, attendance can be mandatory.

**Generalists vs. specialists.** Clubs are staffed by youth development workers, who often work in many program areas. Many staff are needed to work with large numbers of youth, but funding constraints mean that staff are usually part-time and often receive low wages. In contrast, community arts programs offer programming for a smaller number of youth and are staffed by professional artists who are compensated at rates that acknowledge their expertise.

In light of these differences, YAI's pilot was designed to investigate whether the 10 success principles could be implemented in Boys & Girls Clubs to transform the existing arts programs into high-quality art skill-development opportunities for low-income urban youth.

### **YAI Pilot and Program Structure**

The YAI pilot involved BGCA, three affiliate Clubs (the local umbrella organizations), and six units (Clubhouses in which YAI programming took place). BGCA served as the intermediary organization, overseeing and supporting the pilot implementation. For this pilot, BGCA selected three Clubs in close geographic proximity to one another: Boys & Girls Clubs of Central Minnesota, Boys & Girls Clubs of Greater Green Bay, and Boys & Girls Clubs of Greater Milwaukee. All served low-income youth and were committed to the arts, but they had not yet focused on developing high-quality art skill-development programs. Each Club selected two units to execute YAI's programming, and each of those units implemented two art forms, which were selected with input from Club members.

**Figure 3. YAI Art Forms**

ART FORM	TOTAL NUMBER OF CLASSES IN ART FORM	TYPE OF CLASS (NUMBER)
PERFORMING ARTS	3 classes	Dance (3)
VISUAL ARTS	3 classes	Mural arts (1), visual arts (2)
DIGITAL ARTS	6 classes	Fashion design (1),* film/video production (2), digital music (2), graphic arts (1)

\* BGCA categorizes fashion design as a digital art because the equipment used creates similar dynamics. Participants work individually at computers or sewing machines and require individual support.

Figure 3 shows the three categories of art forms implemented and the number of classes offered by the six participating units. In BGCA's categorization, fashion design is included with digital arts because the dynamics are similar: Whether they work at computers or sewing machines, participants have an individual work stations and need support to learn the equipment.

To implement the arts classes, the Clubs hired professional practicing artists, including:

- A dancer who choreographed a popular television show
- A film producer who worked with public television and had won an Emmy award
- An audio engineer who produced music for various rap artists

These professional artists had the credibility and the “wow” factor that tweens wanted. Initially the most important hiring criterion was art skills, but Clubs quickly learned that youth development skills and cultural competence were equally important, if not more so. When artists didn't have prior experience with tweens, Clubs offered youth development training, both internal and external. Artists were also given up to a month for onboarding before their classes launched. During this time, they were encouraged to circulate through their units to meet participants and other staff, observe programs, and learn the unit's daily routines.

YAI artists offered two types of classes: skill-development and exposure. Skill-development classes

were held several times a week for one or two hours a day with the explicit goal of building specific artistic knowledge and competencies. Participants in skill-development classes were expected to attend regularly, arrive on time, adhere to a strict code of conduct, and participate in a public culminating event. Exposure classes were for interested participants who were unable or unwilling to adhere to these requirements. They were also open to skill-development participants who wanted more time to practice. Both types of classes were held in one of YAI's newly designed near-professional-quality art, dance, film, or recording studios. These spaces were dedicated to YAI and so were not used by other unit programs.

A typical skill-development session began with participants gathering for an informal check-in. The artist would then introduce the day's skill-development activities, which usually involved work toward the culminating project. After offering a brief professional-level demonstration, the artist would quickly move to engage youth in hands-on activities with high-quality materials or equipment. As participants worked, often collaboratively, on their projects, the artist would circulate through the room offering instruction, feedback, and encouragement while making sure the climate of the studio was emotionally safe. Artists regularly solicited participants' ideas and suggestions to incorporate into current and future programs.

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## Successes and Challenges of the YAI Pilot

Implementation research on the pilot sites over a three-year period showed that, with targeted funding at a level that permitted robust implementation of the 10 principles, the Clubs did, in fact, successfully implement high-quality art skill-development programs, though not without challenges (McClanahan & Hartmann, 2017). The research set out to answer three questions:

1. Were youth attracted to high-quality arts programs in a Club setting that offers many different types of programs; and what strategies did Clubs use to recruit youth to the program?
2. Were tweens engaged and participating regularly; and what did it take to ensure engagement and regular participation in a rigorous skill-development program?
3. What was the perceived value to youth and Clubs from high-quality arts programs?

To answer these questions, we examined program participation data from the three years of the pilot, 2014 to 2016. We drew data from BGCA's 2016 National Youth Outcomes Survey on the needs and interests of 225 pilot Club tweens, including YAI participants. In addition, we surveyed participants about their YAI experiences each year, gathering data from 272 YAI tweens. We also facilitated 25 focus groups over three years, speaking with a total of 114 participants, including 32 tweens who had stopped participating in YAI. Finally, we interviewed 19 teaching artists, over 100 other Club staff, and 23 parents from all six sites.

### Attracting Participants

The first research question addresses what attracted tweens to YAI programs and how units recruited participants. Findings show that tweens were interested in the arts programs designed according to the 10 success principles. During the three years of the study, 1,280 tweens participated in YAI. Realizing early on that current members were expressing interest in YAI, units focused on internal recruitment. The six units launched 12 skill-development classes in fall 2014. With initial expectations of 15 participants per class per day and an assumption that it would take 20 enrolled youth to meet that expectation, the capacity for the initiative thus was 240 skill-development students per semester. Figure 4 shows that YAI enrollment trended upward over time and surpassed its skill-development capacity in spring 2016.

The three primary art forms—digital, performing, and visual arts—recruited comparable numbers of

participants. However, over time, it became apparent that the enrollment capacity of the art forms varied based on room size, equipment needs, and the amount of individual support required. For example, dance classes took place in relatively large studio spaces and required less individual support, so more than 15 dancers could be served in one skill-development class. Technical art forms, such as digital music or fashion design, took place in smaller spaces, needed a computer or sewing machine for each participant, and required significant one-on-one support; these classes reached maximum capacity at eight to 10 students. Units often offered additional weekly skill-development classes for these art forms in order to serve more youth.

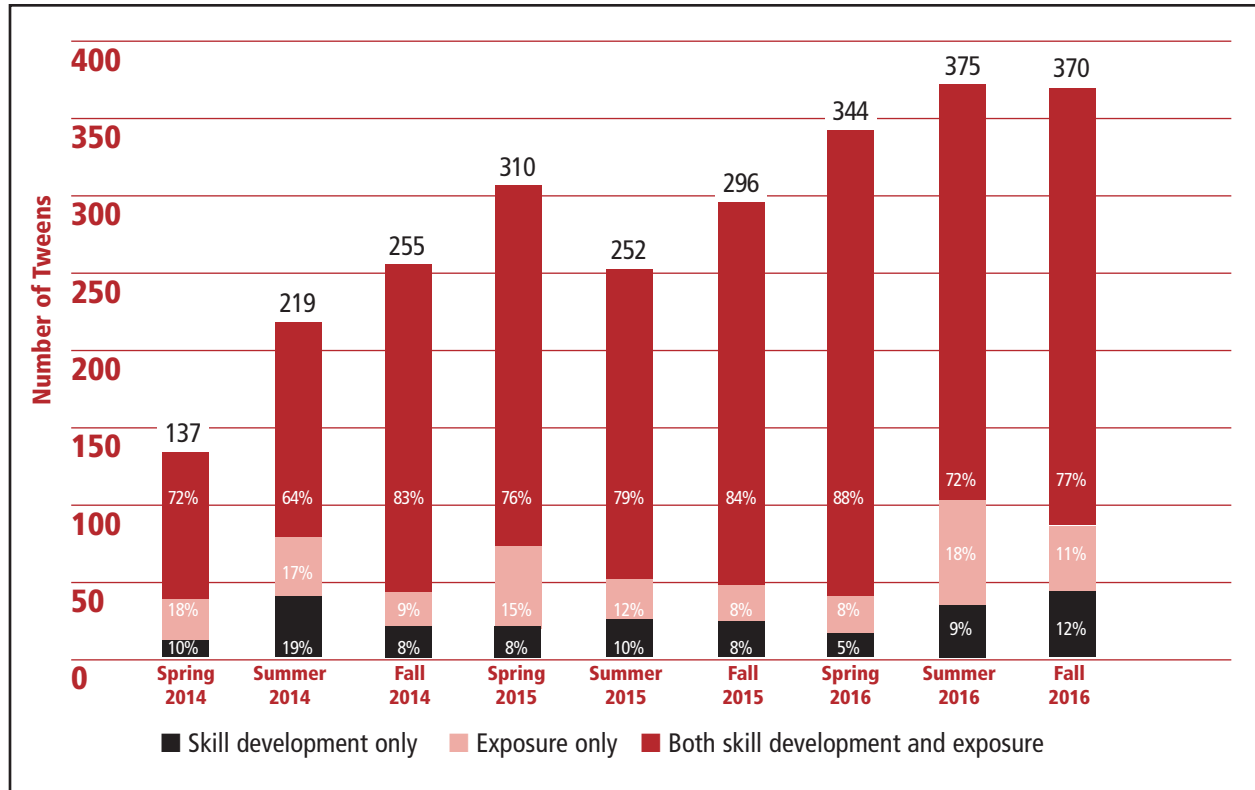
YAI, like other Club programs, primarily served low-income youth of color. Gender and age differences emerged in participation in the three art forms and two class types. In general, YAI attracted more girls than boys, even though Clubs served approximately equal percentages of each gender. However, gender differences varied by art form. Most skill-development participants were girls, but boys were almost as likely as girls to participate in digital art skill-development classes. Girls formed the majority of exposure class participants in performing and visual arts, but boys were the majority of exposure class participants in digital arts. A larger proportion of boys participated in performing arts exposure classes than in performing arts skill-development classes. These participation patterns suggest that boys were willing to try out different art forms but were less likely than girls to commit—except in digital arts, where they were strongly represented.

YAI participants in both types of classes were about evenly divided between older and younger tweens: 47 percent were under 12 and 53 percent were 12 to 14 years old. Young people in the older age group were more likely to participate in digital arts than in other art forms.

Many of the 10 success principles—particularly those that call for professional teaching artists, art-specific spaces, near-professional equipment, culminating events, and youth input—bolstered recruitment efforts by attracting attention to arts programming and making it more visible in the unit. Teaching artists attracted the attention of tweens with their experience and enthusiasm. They worked to build relationships with youth to get them to try out the classes, circulating throughout sites to talk about YAI. Clubs intentionally hired artists a month before their classes began to give them this opportunity to recruit participants. Other unit

**Figure 4. YAI Enrollment, 2014–2016**

Source: YAI participation data, 2014–2016. Individual students are counted in each program period in which they attended YAI.



staff also reached out to tweens, and participants often recruited their friends. YAI’s new art spaces (Principle 3) and near-professional level equipment (Principle 8) also attracted tweens’ and parents’ attention and supported peer-to-peer word-of-mouth recruitment. One teaching artist described an “explosion of interest” once art spaces were completed.

YAI artists made youth artwork visible and held high-quality culminating events in the unit; these displays supported peer recruitment. At some units, for example, dance performances were filmed and posted on video monitors in the site, as well as on YouTube and Facebook, to engage other youth. At other units, film program participants walked through the sites with their professional video cameras, filming activities and events. YAI tweens also reported that culminating events and other displays, particularly those that took place on site, generated the interest of their peers. One focus group participant explained, “When they see us doing our thing in the studio, it motivates them to think... ‘Hey, this is something I might be able to do.’ It gets them thinking it might be fun for them.”

Another way YAI attracted participants was

by seeking youth input, through surveys and conversations, to identify specific artistic interests. Youth surveys revealed that the vast majority of YAI participants were interested in learning an art form. However, before YAI, the Clubs did not offer artistic skill-building programs to meet this need. Girls, especially, reported that they were interested in YAI because few other Club programs truly attracted or engaged them.

### **Engaging Participants**

Findings on research question 2 revealed that YAI did engage participants: A majority of young people participated regularly and returned the following year. Comments from focus groups illustrate the value participants placed on YAI. One said simply, “It’s the best thing I have ever done.” Another, in response to a question about how to improve the program, wrote, “One thing is that it could be one more day of the week... More days besides Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. I wish it could go on one more day.”

Teaching artists, other Club staff, and parents observed high levels of youth engagement. Staff in

all three Clubs consistently reported that participants were eager to attend YAI classes; some even waited outside the studio door for the program to start. Parents reported that their children talked frequently about YAI at home. One said, “The program is a big deal, family-wise, because they bring home so much of it. We talk about it more than we talk about school. It’s such a big deal—it’s such an accomplishment.”

YAI participants showed that they were willing to put effort into the program. True engagement includes willingness to put concentrated effort into a challenging program (Greene, Lee, Constance, & Hynes, 2013). Creative challenges are necessary for skill development and broader youth development.

High expectations (Principle 4) made YAI programs challenging. In almost half of the focus groups, respondents said that they were embracing these challenges. One dance participant said, “It’s lots of fun, but at some point, you have to do hard work. It’s not just playing around. At one point, you have to get real serious.” The vast majority of YAI participants (1,026 of 1,280) chose to participate in skill-development classes, the more rigorous component of YAI; 254 opted for drop-in exposure classes only.

Embodying Principle 4, YAI skill-development classes required a regular attendance commitment, a feature that differentiated YAI from other Club programs. Artists varied in their implementation of attendance policies. All allowed excused absences for doctors’ appointments or school and family obligations. About half offered rewards for strong attendance or consequences for missing too many classes; for example, participants with good attendance were allowed to go on field trips, take home art supplies, or participate in the culminating event.

More than half of the tweens who enrolled in the demanding skill-development classes participated regularly. BGCA defines *regular participants* as those who come to the Club one or more days per week and *high-engagement participants* as those who come two or more days per week. Across all art forms, more than half of YAI tweens each semester attended at least once per week. Almost one-third attended at least twice per week. In addition, 60 percent of YAI skill-development youth returned the following year. This percentage is

particularly impressive considering that young people typically begin to decrease their involvement in OST programs as they reach middle school.

Early on, Clubs recognized the importance of gaining families’ buy-in (Principle 9), particularly to support the attendance commitment. Parents who were accustomed to picking up their children on the way home from work needed to understand that participants could not leave YAI classes mid-session. Teaching artists quickly realized the need to communicate to parents that, in order to develop skill in the art form, participants had to stay for the full program period (typically two hours) and be present for each skill-development session.

Club staff used common formal and informal methods to build parent relationships. They sent letters and engaged in conversations with parents at the site or in the parking lot. In time, teaching artists obtained parents’ contact information and used texts, email, and social media to update parents and share photos and videos of youth work. Club staff also used formal events, such as open houses, family

nights, and culminating events, to build relationships with parents. A few teaching artists created contracts for youth and parents or organized parent meetings to outline the attendance commitment.

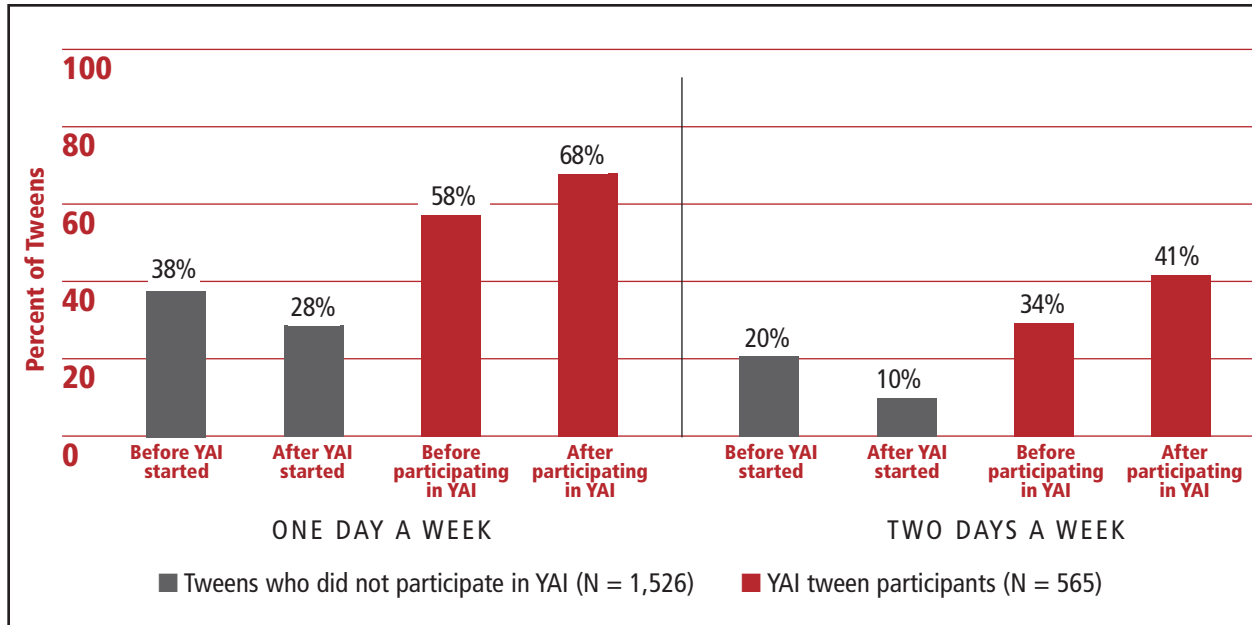
Strong youth development practices, including adult support and positive peer relationships (Principle 6), youth input and leadership (Principle 7), hands-on activities with current equipment (Principle 8), and physical and emotional safety (Principle 10) helped to balance the attendance requirement and maintain ongoing engagement in YAI. Participants and teaching artists consistently pointed to these principles—which were also important for recruitment—as important for keeping youth engaged in challenging art programs, providing the necessary balance for high expectations. Youth in focus groups described these aspects of YAI as elements of the program they particularly appreciated. When implementation lapsed, the absence of these principles became a reason for not participating.

Across Clubs and art forms, participants and parents agreed that young people were engaged and participating regularly because they were interested in the art form. This strong motivating interest in the

Staff in all three Clubs consistently reported that participants were eager to attend YAI classes; some even waited outside the studio door for the program to start.

**Figure 5. Club Attendance of YAI and Non-YAI Tweens**

Source: Club participation data, 2012–2016



art form is what the Search Institute would describe as a “spark” (Scales, Benson, & Roehlkepartain, 2011). When young people have sparks of enthusiasm, they are more likely to thrive (Scales et al., 2011). At least half of focus group participants described an interest in the arts as a motivating factor for their YAI participation. About one-fifth entered YAI with an existing interest in the art form that YAI helped to nurture. However, about one-third appeared to be developing new interests; they were excited to come to YAI sessions because they enjoyed the art form and wanted to keep learning and practicing new skills. A few participants were beginning to imagine future careers in art. One said, “[Dance class] changed me. At first, I didn’t know what I wanted to be, and now I know what I want to be, and now I know I want to follow with my dreams.”

YAI parents also observed that their children were motivated by the art forms and described seeing their children practicing at home. They were pleased that their children were engaged in productive activities. One parent with a daughter in fashion design described her daughter’s home activities:

She was really immersed in [fashion design]. There are times where I can’t find her, and I’ll holler and say, “Where are you?” And she says, “I’m downstairs sewing.” ... She uses my sewing machine more than I do.

Other parents reported that their children were engaged at home in filming videos or drawing and painting. One said, “All [my child] does is dance, dance, dance. But before, she wasn’t really into it.”

Middle school youth have many barriers to OST participation. Clubs could address some, but not all, of these barriers. In particular, Club leaders had to manage unit-wide schedules to reduce competition with other programs of high interest to youth. Teaching artists had to manage program growing pains, particularly keeping the content fresh and challenging for program veterans while integrating new, younger participants. Toward the end of the study period, a few teaching artists experimented with project-based instruction to engage more experienced youth and permit them to work independently from younger students.

A barrier to participation that Clubs could not address as successfully was outside competition. Young people who had discontinued their attendance reported in focus groups that school and home obligations interfered not only with YAI but with Club attendance in general. Older tweens were more likely than younger tweens to report these conflicts, which included homework, school sports practice, and babysitting responsibilities.

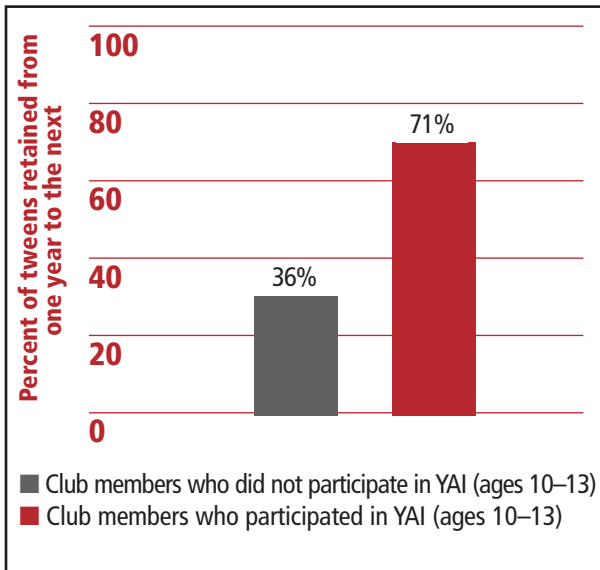
### **Providing Value**

Research question 3 examines the perceived value of high-quality arts programs to youth and Clubs. The



## Figure 6. One-Year Club Retention among YAI and Non-YAI Tweens

Source: Club participation data (2012–2016)



data suggest that arts programs have the potential to increase the involvement of tweens and retain them over time. These program also can foster social and emotional development as well as artistic skills.

Figure 5 shows that YAI participants increased their Club attendance after joining YAI, while non-YAI Club members' attendance declined over the same period. YAI participants also had higher year-to-year retention rates than non-participants, as shown in Figure 6. Though the data do not allow us to conclude that YAI *caused* youth to return to the Club, these findings do suggest that YAI is a promising strategy for keeping tweens engaged.

Respondents reported that YAI participants experienced social and emotional growth, in keeping with research showing that high-quality OST programs bolster social and emotional development when young people participate regularly (American Institutes for Research, 2015). Growth in several social and emotional skills, including self-awareness, self-management and persistence, and relationship skills, was observed by parents and Club staff and reported by YAI participants.

Parents and Club staff commonly described how participants increased their self-confidence through their experiences with the teaching artists, their efforts to meet the program's high expectations, and their work toward culminating events. One parent offered this typical comment:

I think [YAI has] exceeded the goals I set. [Teaching artist] has performed a miracle on my daughter. She can dance now! She's not shy, she doesn't mind getting up in front of people—and she would not do that. She's done a 180 as far as her personality. She wants to do more now, and she was not like that [before].

Participants in four focus groups also described the importance of performing or sharing their artwork. These experiences helped them “get over shyness,” as one put it, or overcome fears of performing—improvements that may indicate growing self-confidence.

Although teaching artists and participants noted the importance of developing confidence, they also said that YAI helped participants move beyond blind self-assurance to accurately assess their skills. One participant got a reality check that led him to work to improve:

It's definitely changed my confidence and show-off attitude. When I first came, I thought I was the best at everything. I realized when I got in the [recording] booth, I didn't sound as good as I thought I did. [The teaching artist] explains to you that when you come in this program, you are not the best; you're supposed to build your way up to the best. You just can't come into the business as the best.

Respondents described changes in YAI participants' self-management skills, crediting the program's high expectations and participants' relationships with teaching artists. One parent reported:

He makes sure he has his dance clothes in his book bag, and he makes sure he commits himself to being here.... He's finishing his work at school, because he knows that, when he gets to the Club, he has to eat and go to dance.... He knows he can't be late because then [teaching artist] won't let him dance right away, so he's like, “I gotta get this work done”—which is great for school.

One Club staff member said, “You can see them being a little bit more responsible, being more of a leader rather than causing trouble or causing issues.”

Some YAI youth also appeared to be developing the ability to persist in challenging artistic tasks, another aspect of self-management. This competency was a clear theme in five youth focus groups as well as in

interviews with parents and Club staff. Several dance participants described learning lessons about hard work and practice. One said: “I love dancing, and if you like this, you have to practice a lot to get better and better.” A visual arts student similarly reported, “You have to take your time on doing your best because, if you rush, it may not turn out.”

Parents, staff, and youth reported that YAI fostered relationships between young people who would not otherwise have been friends. For example, a staff member observed that YAI “made friendship with kids you wouldn’t think would have friendships, because it’s bringing kids from their different groups.”

Finally, YAI created the conditions in which youth could develop art skills, including understanding how to use and care for tools, materials, and space. Research has shown that these skills are foundational components of artistic development (Hetland, Winner, Veenema, & Sheridan, 2007). YAI’s professional artists, high expectations, current equipment and technology, and high-quality art spaces all created the environment for artistic skill development. In three-quarters of the focus groups, participants provided concrete examples of skills they learned, such as how to draw cartoons and 3D images, how to sew, how to create special effects, and how to do basic dance moves. Participants accepted their beginner status as they described learning to use video cameras, editing software, and sewing machines or to care for paintbrushes. These YAI participants were improving their ability to use and care for the tools and materials of their art form.

### **Recommendations**

The YAI initiative demonstrated that an arts program based on the 10 success principles can attract and engage tweens, foster positive youth development, and increase participation and retention in the implementing organization. This research suggests strategies OST providers can use to attract tweens and engage them in arts programming.

#### ***Make Arts Visible and Valued***

Implementing the 10 success principles required well-equipped studio spaces, professional teaching

artists, new equipment and technology, and public culminating events. These aspects both made YAI visible and conveyed the importance of the arts in ways that naturally attracted youth. Multicomponent OST providers seeking to recruit youth to arts programs should assess the degree to which the arts are visible and valued in their organization.

#### ***Offer Multiple Engagement Strategies***

Many participants committed to the high-quality arts program, but some preferred to dabble. YAI therefore offered drop-in exposure classes in addition to the more intensive skill-development classes. OST programs seeking to recruit tweens should offer both lower- and higher-intensity opportunities to meet different needs. In order to offer appealing exposure experiences that can lead to deeper involvement, programs should carefully structure these classes to fit the art form and the participant age range.

#### ***Balance High Expectations with Adult Support***

Initially, Club leaders feared that YAI’s attendance requirement would deter participation. However, the attendance commitment was later recognized as a distinguishing characteristic that helped to engage tweens. The attendance expectations generally were flexible enough to accommodate tweens’ other commitments, but rigorous enough to challenge participants in ways that helped them to develop artistic skills. High expectations and requirements that they commit to the program do not deter tweens—in fact, they support deep engagement, especially when reinforced by supportive adult mentors and strong youth development practices.

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#### ***Engage Families***

Even though tweens have more autonomy than younger children, YAI staff found that they needed to enlist parents to help participants commit to regular attendance. OST programs for tweens often struggle to connect with parents, but successful communication is worth the effort. YAI artists used emails, text messages, and social media to engage parents; culminating events deepened parent support.

## **Maintain Program Quality**

The strong youth development practices identified in the 10 success principles were essential to retaining tweens in YAI. When young people left the program, their reasons often reflected lapses in implementation, such as disruptions in relationships with teaching artists or peers, lack of response to their interests, inadequate hands-on practice, or challenges with physical or emotional safety. Programs seeking to retain tweens can start by assessing program quality, particularly the strength of core youth development practices.

## **Develop Sparks**

Youth need opportunities to develop their artistic sparks with the support of adult mentors. To address this need, multicomponent OST programs can add to or expand their offerings in both traditional and nontraditional art forms. Providers should hire professional teaching artists who can mentor participants in the art forms; they should also attend to the other nine success principles of high-quality arts programming.

## **Toward the Future**

Based on the promising evidence from this initial pilot effort, BGCA is continuing to refine the YAI model in a second pilot phase. Five new Clubs will build on lessons learned from the first three Clubs to replicate YAI in new settings while seeking strategies to improve cost-effectiveness. Research will continue to document lessons about creating high-quality arts programs that attract tweens.

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