

OPINION

School arts instruction needs help now



(Shutterstock)



By **GALE BREWER**

PUBLISHED: April 17, 2026 at 5:00 AM EDT

For someone who spends as much time as I do inside New York's public schools, there may be nothing more uplifting than walking into a children's arts class. There's an energy in those rooms — messy, focused, and alive — as students mix paint colors, shape clay, and debate whether a line should be thicker or thinner. It's a constant reminder that arts education is essential for our city's children.

Many of those classrooms are sustained by a municipal gem named [Studio in a School](#). It serves as the primary nonprofit provider of arts teachers to [New York City's public schools](#), reaching approximately 30,000 students in more than 150 schools across the five boroughs. I worry that organizations like it are an endangered species.

Studio was born of a crisis. In 1977, when New York City faced bankruptcy and arts programs were being cut from public schools, the [great arts philanthropist Agnes Gund](#), then chair of the [Museum of Modern Art](#), founded Studio, a quiet act of courage at a time when few philanthropists had ever set foot inside a public school. Determined that children would still have access to art, she committed herself to filling that gap.

Her new organization brought on working artists and paired them with schools that had lost their funding. It was a radical move to embed artists in classrooms for months, not days, and to treat them as essential members of the school community. Gund helped grow Studio from a small pilot into one of the nation's leading arts education nonprofits.

But today a growing crisis is threatening to erode opportunities for arts nonprofits such as Studio. Across the country, districts are being asked to do more with less, and arts programs are again on the chopping block. Philanthropic support for the arts is plummeting, and with the passing last year of major philanthropists such as Gund and [Leonard Lauder](#), there are few replacements on the horizon.

Educators are already seeing what that means in practical terms right now — tighter program schedules and fewer resources. I fear that the messy, focused, joyful work happening in our arts classes will quietly disappear. Hundreds of our public schools still lack a full-time arts teacher. And those gaps are not evenly distributed. They fall most heavily on students in low-income communities.

As funding falters, the need for city government to step into the shoes of philanthropists like Gund and Lauder becomes even more vital. They belonged to a generation of arts benefactors that may never be replicated in our lifetimes.

If we are serious about educational equity, then arts education has to be treated as part of the core mission of our schools. Organizations like Studio in a School can't be treated as a bonus for public schools; they are part of the infrastructure that keeps arts education alive in under-resourced communities. Without them, access to the arts quickly begins to erode.

Mayor Mamdani and the City Council, as well as our partners in Albany, have an opportunity to commit the resources needed to stabilize and strengthen arts education across the public schools, including long-term support for the nonprofit providers schools rely on. Once these programs disappear, they are difficult to rebuild.

Crises call out for heroes. The schools have faced similar challenges before. The need for government to step into the shoes once filled by philanthropists like Agnes Gund becomes even more vital. Her legacy reminds us that public leadership can ensure that every child, regardless of zip code, can experience the transformative power of art

The day that arts instruction once again starts disappearing from public schools must never come. It's up to the city to make sure of it.

Brewer represents the Upper West Side in the City Council.

2026 > April > 17