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Creative Learning in Adverse Times

How Austin Independent School District's Creative Learning Initiative Advanced Their Work During the COVID-19 Pandemic

March 2020 Through December 2021

The Creative Learning Initiative (CLI) is a city-wide collaboration between MINDPOP, the City of Austin, Austin Independent School District (AISD), and more than 100 art and cultural organizations dedicated to equitable access to creative learning and the arts for every student in Austin. The CLI model is grounded in research showing that arts programs in and out of school have a powerful impact on students' cognition and youth's development (Ruppert, 2006). At the campus level, the three pillars of the program are to (a) increase students' access to sequential fine arts instruction, (b) increase community arts programming during and out of the school day, and (c) foster classroom learning with Creative Teaching across the curriculum. This paper describes the work done to advance CLI goals across the three pillars of the program despite the challenges brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, which was a consequence of the strong foundation CLI maintained over the 10 years prior.

CLI Pillar #1: Creative Teaching in the Classroom

Creative teaching (CT) is an instructional approach that uses the arts to increase instructional rigor and students' engagement as well as the first critical pillar of CLI. CLI supports a professional development model that empowers teachers to use a set of research-based CT strategies to increase students' learning. Unlike many forms of arts integration, which match a prescribed arts standard with an academic standard within the curriculum, the CT strategies are defined by the instructional technique rather than the curriculum content. The CT techniques draw on practices from drama, visual arts, music, and movement as the instructional framework to engage students, drive inquiry, promote rigor, and create personal connections to academic content in every subject.

In March of 2020, educational practices were upended by the first wave of COVID-19 in the United States. During this chaotic time, all teachers were expected to quickly learn a new skill: how to instruct students virtually. Despite the challenge, the CLI team believed it was important to integrate the CT strategies into classroom instruction, and in fact it was even more crucial because these techniques could help students express themselves, self-regulate, and cope with the stresses of the pandemic. CT strategies could help teachers keep the spirit of the class high and keep learning fun, even when they were limited to online instruction. In addition, the CT strategies could reduce the perceived distance between students and teachers, as well as among students, that was inevitably created by the virtual instruction format. So, within the first week of the pandemic and associated school closures, the CLI leaders got to work. Program leaders converted CT strategies to a virtual format, first through a vetting process and then as a continuous improvement cycle (Figure 1). For an example of how a specific strategy was redesigned for the virtual format, see Table 1.

Octopus, Painting 1 student artwork, Rhiannon, Akins High School, AISD Virtual Art Show for Visual Arts, Spring 2020. See www.austinisd.org/arts/visual for all student artwork.

Figure 1.

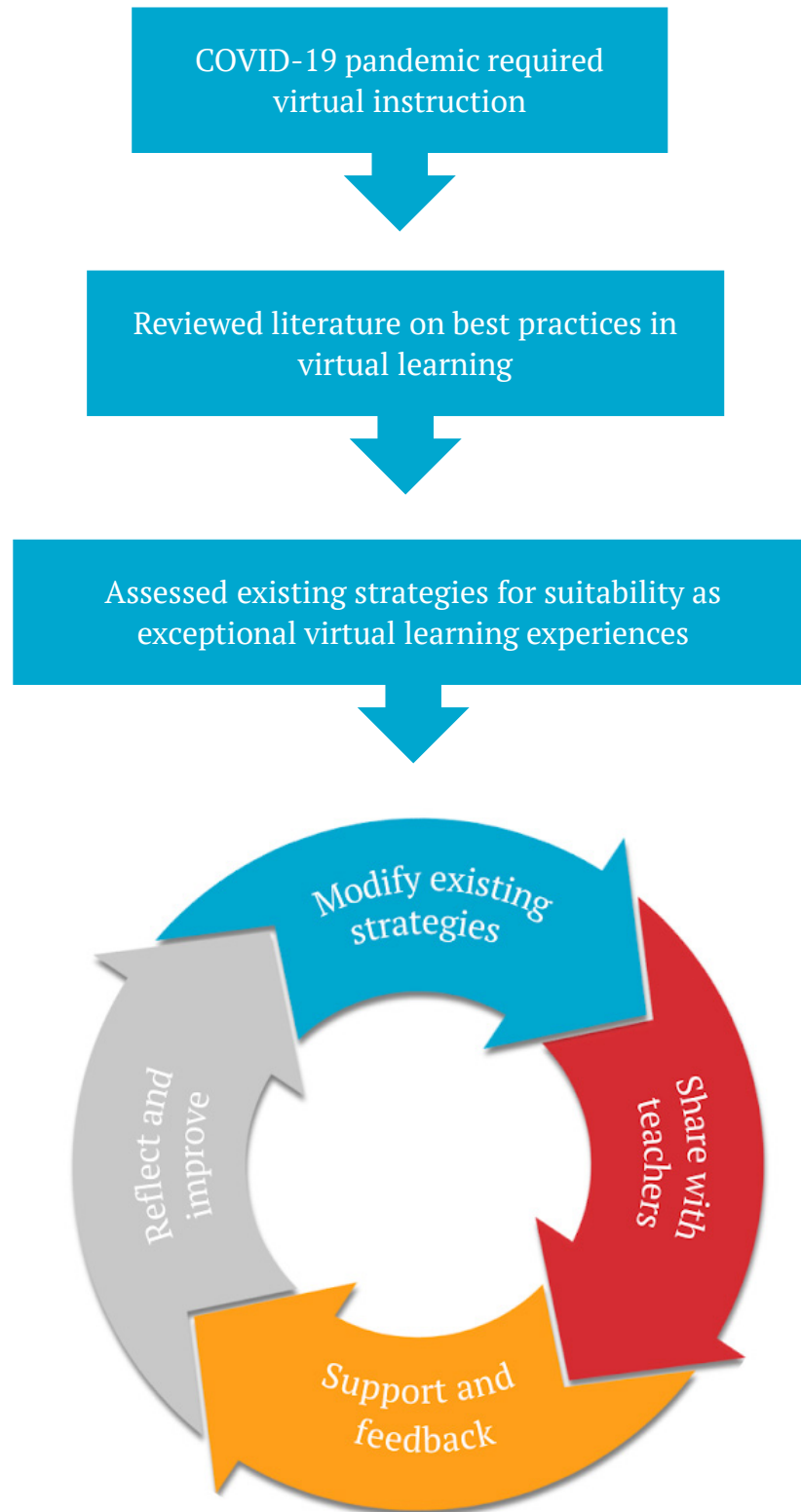**Process for Converting Creative Teaching Strategies into Virtual Instruction**

Table 1.

Idea and Movement CLI Strategy Goals and Revisions for a Virtual Format

Strategy Goal	Accomplished originally	Accomplished virtually
Students translate their understanding about a topic into symbolic, physical representations. Often students generate new ideas through this movement exploration that add to their understanding about a given topic. Physical engagement is added to standard instruction to make learning more "sticky" (Bambrick-Santoyo, 2018, p. 97), or durable, and help students retrieve information after a longer period of time has passed, compared with other instructional methodologies.	The facilitator prompts students to reflect on what they know (and/or do not know) about a topic and asks students to generate movements. Students have a unique movement experience that is not like their everyday learning.	
Students move in space to show their understanding and discover new thinking through movement related to the topic.	The facilitator encourages students to move into a group circle or into personal space around the room.	Students choose a unique space at home and incorporate the size and depth of the Zoom screen as components of their space.
Students make creative movement choices based on a constraint related to body, action, space, time, and energy to increase cognitive processing of the topic.	The facilitator guides students to choose a creative constraint to revise movement with additional intentionality.	
Each student feels comfortable and is able to negotiate levels of desired and feasible social and cognitive risk during their movement experience.	The facilitator asks for volunteers to spotlight and questions the class about the movements they see, how the movements represent the topic, and what perspectives or information may be missing. Students discuss movements with classmates to spark new ideas and synthesize what is most important about the topic.	Students experiment with their movements off video before turning on their videos and sharing with their classmates. Students can discuss verbally or enter their ideas in the Zoom chat box.

In addition to adapting the CT strategies to an online format, program leaders needed to move their entire sequence of professional development activities for teachers to the online space. The culmination of many decisions made at the beginning of the pandemic year was a full launch into a brand new structure for professional development activities for CT. The following infographics share highlights from the virtual CT professional development workshops and corresponding teacher feedback over the 2020–2021 school year.
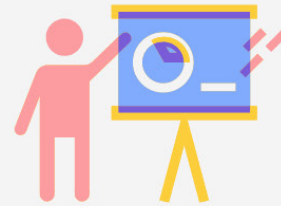
Creative Teaching Professional Development

Structure of Professional Development offered as a result of adjustments made during the COVID-19 pandemic

FACILITATOR TRAINING

- 15 virtual training sessions
- 42 facilitators participated
- Sessions were recorded and used to train facilitators later in the year

FALL 2020 PD

- 18 virtual lessons created
- 135 workshops conducted
- New format: 2 sessions of 90 minutes each
- Participating teachers from 34 schools

SPRING 2021 PD

- 40 virtual lessons created
- Participating teachers from 20 schools
  - 339 attended at least one session
  - 242 attended at least two sessions

ADDITIONAL OPPORTUNITIES

- 6 refresher courses
  - 44 teachers (62% secondary)
- 5 teacher exchanges for campus leaders
- 1 new Intro to CLI asynchronous course

Creative Teaching Workshop Surveys

Results from teacher participants in foundational, sustaining, and conference style workshops

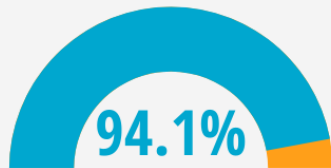**2,937 responses**
(1,572 unique)

85% elementary; 15% secondary

4,405.5 hours
of professional development

94.1%

INCREASED MY SKILLS

"I like the way we had the opportunity to share different ways to implement this activity, from uses in different parts of the curriculum to accommodations/ modifications."

– Teacher at Kiker Elementary

94.3%

PROVIDED EFFECTIVE TEACHING TOOLS

"I love that these strategies are always open-ended, which will lead our students to be more comfortable to talk, and then start thinking more open-mindedly. Simply comparing and contrasting two images and coming up with what might have happened in between the two can be really powerful!"

– Teacher at Andrews Elementary

What We Learned

The efficiency with which the CLI team guided an enormous amount of change in CT during the pandemic would not have been possible without the program's deep roots. Pedagogically, the leadership needed to tie in the best practices of virtual learning, but the CT strategies themselves were already moored in principles of learning science. Logistically, CLI had a core team with more than 70 collective years of experience working on CT strategies. As a source of professional development activities in the district, the CLI team had established credibility as a voice of instructional integrity. The most impressive aspect of the instructional redesign is that even while reacting to the pandemic, the team was intentionally proactive. They kept two meta-frameworks in place to guide the redesign process: (a) to design for an experience that would outlive the pandemic and (b) to design through an equity lens. The following figure shows the program roots that led to many fruitful achievements throughout the pandemic.

Recommendations for Creative Teaching

- Continue to support teachers in using CT to create optimal learning environments. Not only because CT strategies are moored in principles of learning science, but also because they are biologically respectful and neurodevelopmentally informed (see https://www.bdperry.com/research). Teachers' intentionality about their modality of instruction ultimately benefits the task design, students' performance outcomes, and teachers' ability to support the whole child.
- Even when in-person instruction is possible, teachers can still choose to leverage the unique contribution of technology to the CT strategies because it might provide different in-roads for student engagement and different conceptual possibilities for learning. This choice might be especially useful when targeting older students, who would typically have a device in class, might feel awkward taking creative risks in front of their peers, and should be developing their digital skills anyway.
- Consider developing guidelines to help teachers decipher which specific strategies work best virtually. Draw on community and relationship-building activities in developing the guidelines, acknowledging that teachers, like students, need social support for better decision-making and self-regulation, especially in times of stress.

Recommendations for Professional Development Activities

- Continue to offer shorter professional development sessions that are broken up into more digestible time chunks.
- Continue to offer some of the CT workshops virtually to support participation from teachers across all campuses, at times that are compatible with their schedules.
- Continue to make explicit connections between CT and satisfying the social-emotional and academic engagement needs of students.
- Consider including options for the professional development workshops that are offered to teachers as electives, rather than school-mandated.
- Return to the development of the micro-credentialing course online.

"I found students more engaged, and it surprised me how much most of them liked it. I definitely will introduce some creative teaching strategies outside the pandemic."
—First-time middle school teacher

"Every day, multilingual students take risks in order to learn a new language. Creative learning experiences lower the affective filter and create a safe space for students to take the risk of pronouncing something incorrectly and to learn from their mistakes."
—Multilingual Education Team coordinator

"Students were more engaged every time I incorporated CLI strategies in my teaching."
—Special education elementary teacher

"CLI strategies were so essential during remote learning."
—Pre-K teacher

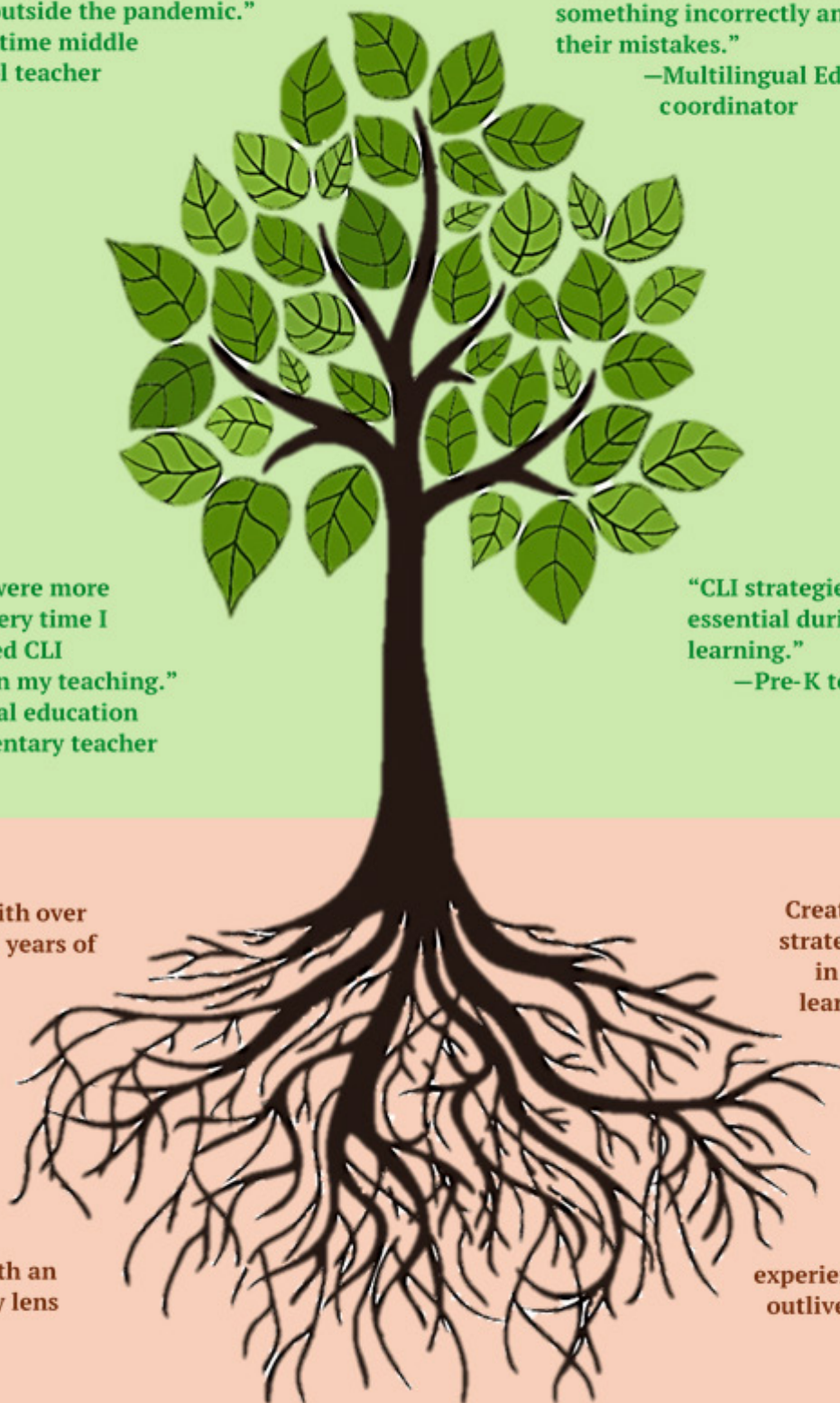Core team with over 70 collective years of experience

Creative teaching strategies moored in principles of learning science

Design with an equity lens

Design for an experience that would outlive the pandemic

Established credibility within the district as a voice of instructional integrity

CLI Pillar #2: Arts Partnerships

Given the upheaval in education sparked by the COVID-19 pandemic and resulting uncertainties, one might expect arts partnerships with schools to take a sudden hiatus. However, most schools continued to connect their students to CLI's collective impact network (Papendieck, Hasty, & Knowles, 2021) throughout the pandemic.

The sustainability and even growth of CLI's arts partnership network was largely thanks to the structural support of MINDPOP, a partner organization with CLI that provides backbone support to the entire network of arts organizations in the region. If arts organizations want to engage with the school district, MINDPOP helps them navigate the policies and procedures of the school district, augments their visibility to schools, and provides a space for sharing with other arts partners so they can learn from each other. Within AISD, CLI provides its schools with funding and support to set up meaningful arts experiences for students. In 2020—2021, a total of $176,679 was allocated to the Community Arts Partner funds for 89 CLI schools. Schools that were able to implement arts partnerships in 2020—2021 had two primary routes for doing so: 1) based on existing relationships with arts organizations or 2) through CLI's novel creation of the Spring Season of Arts Experiences, an adaption of 27 arts organizations' programs to the district's online learning platform, BLEND (Figure 2). The pooled resources for the Season totaled $53,000, which was augmented by a MINDPOP grant from the Dance Across Austin Initiative for $20,000. See https://creativelearningatx.wordpress.com/2021/06/25/spring-2021-arts-partnerships/ for more information about the Season and CLI arts partnerships during 2020—2021.
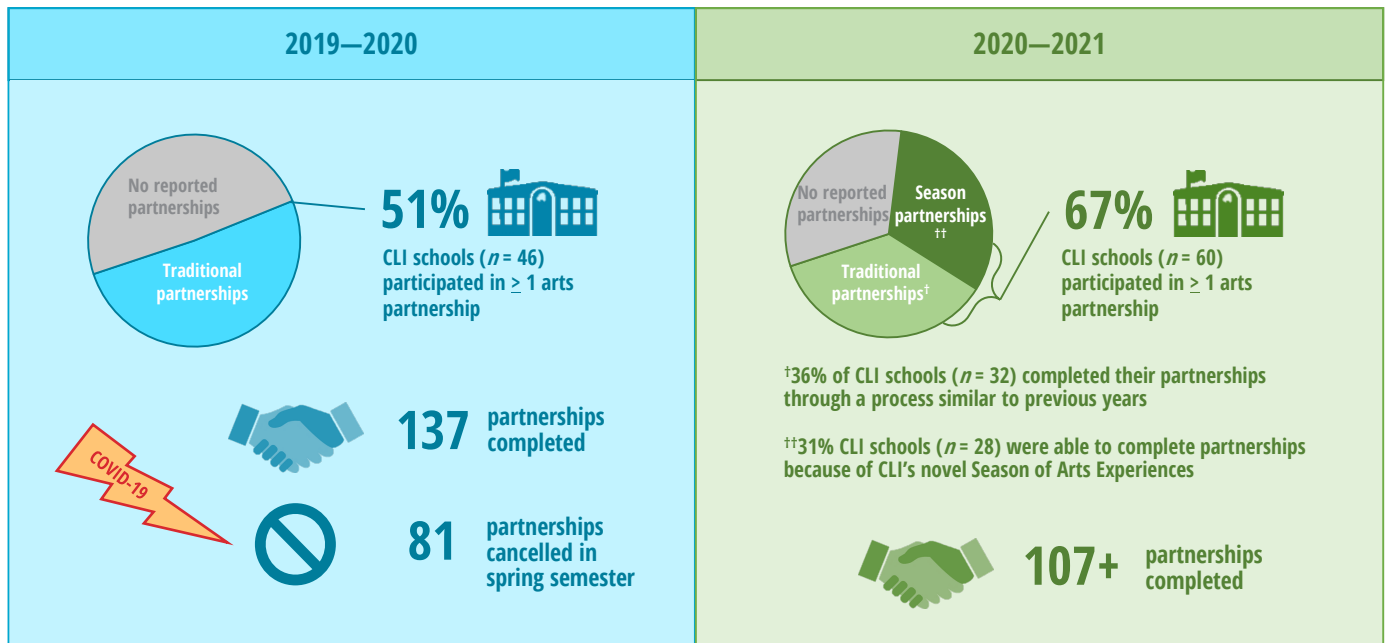
MINDPOP Matchmaker is a searchable database of Austin area arts education providers - designed to facilitate strong arts partnerships in AISD and beyond!

Visit: https://www.mindpopmatchmaker.org

Figure 2.

More Students Had Access to CLI Arts Partnerships in 2020—2021 Largely Due to CLI's Novel Season of Arts Experiences

2019—2020

No reported partnerships / Traditional partnerships

51% CLI schools ($n = 46$) participated in $\geq$ 1 arts partnership

137 partnerships completed

COVID-19

81 partnerships cancelled in spring semester

2020—2021

No reported partnerships / Season partnerships †† / Traditional partnerships†

67% CLI schools ($n = 60$) participated in $\geq$ 1 arts partnership

†36% of CLI schools ($n = 32$) completed their partnerships through a process similar to previous years

††31% CLI schools ($n = 28$) were able to complete partnerships because of CLI's novel Season of Arts Experiences

107+ partnerships completed

Note. It is possible that arts partnership participation was even higher across both years but not reported by the schools. In addition, for SY 2020—2021, partnerships could have been reported later than June 2021. Also note that the 107 partnerships displayed for SY 2020—2021 include 28 schools who participated in the Season of Arts Experiences and had access to programs from 27 unique community arts partners. See https://creativelearningatx.wordpress.com/2021/06/25/spring-2021-arts-partnerships/ for more information about the Season of Arts Experiences and CLI arts partnerships in 2020—2021.

What We Learned

A strong CLI collective impact network with arts partners created resilience in the system through:

- Increased internal and public advocacy support
- Increased opportunities for cross-sharing
- Convening the network of internal and external organizations to problem solve major systemic and situational challenges

Recommendations Moving Forward

- Continue to situate MINDPOP as a hub for all arts organizations working with AISD and to elevate its role as a conduit of ideas not only between the district and arts organizations but increasingly between arts organizations themselves
- Continue to sustain the arts partner network through more frequent virtual meetings, supported by occasional in-person meetings designed to make new connections

## CLI Pillar #3: Visual and Performing Arts Instruction

CLI leaders and AISD's Visual and Performing Arts (VAPA) Department promote access to sustained learning for all prekindergarten through 12th-grade students in music, visual arts, dance, and theater to ensure that all students have access to high-quality arts instruction in a variety of forms on a regular basis. Access to regular participation in the arts is essential to a well-rounded education, but the COVID-19 pandemic was particularly disruptive to fine arts classes. How do you put on a play without a theater? How do you pursue ceramics without a kiln? VAPA classes are often tied to equipment, facilities, and collaboration, which were no longer possible in a remote setting. Despite these challenges, the VAPA team successfully adapted many classroom activities to comply with the emerging and constantly changing health guidelines in 2020–2021. Their novel efforts are depicted in the infographic below.

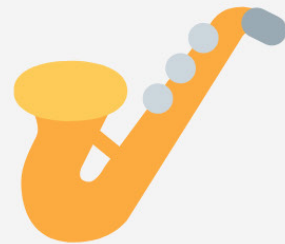# VAPA Teaching Practices During the Pandemic

TEACHING FORMAT TRANSITIONS

- Fully remote in Spring 2020
- Hybrid by Fall 2020
  - Remote and in-person
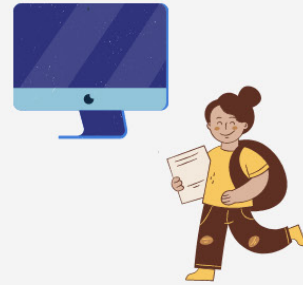
MUSIC CLASSES ADJUST

- VAPA team incorporated new safety guidelines to keep instrument use safe
- Staff distributed instruments to students at home
- Some instruction was modified to work without an instrument

VIRTUAL ART SHOW

- Quick conversion of in-person art show to virtual format
- Aired on AISD TV & social media
- Virtual format allowed non-local family members to view student work
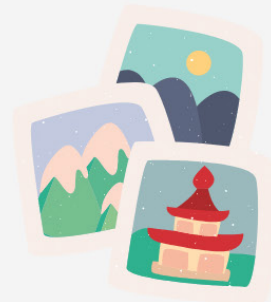
Compared to in 2019-2020, enrollment in arts courses remained consistent on the whole but varied by art form in 2020-2021 (Table 2). In addition, minority student groups' arts course enrollment increased at the secondary level (Figure 3).

Table 2.

While overall arts participation rates remained the same between 2019–2020 and 2020–2021, enrollment changes varied by art form.

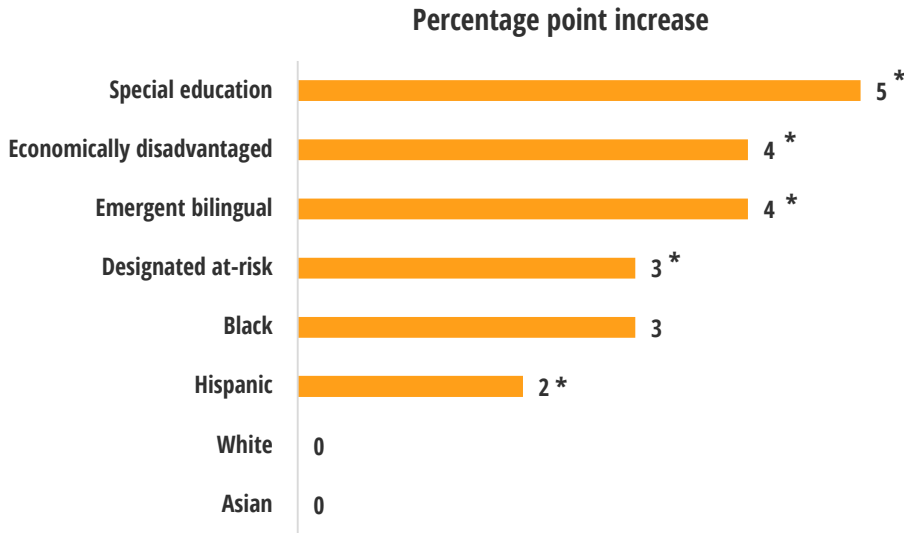|	Middle school	High school	Both middle and high school (all of secondary)
Overall	=	=	=
Music	↓	=	↓
Theater	=	↓	=
Visual arts	↑	↑	↑
Dance	=	↑	=

Source. AISD course enrollment records
Note. All effect sizes were < .20.
= indicates no change; arrows indicate statistically significant change at *p* < .05.

Figure 3.

The arts course enrollment of special student groups increased from 2019–2020 to 2020–2021 at the secondary level.

Percentage point increase

Group	Value
Special education	5 *
Economically disadvantaged	4 *
Emergent bilingual	4 *
Designated at-risk	3 *
Black	3
Hispanic	2 *
White	0
Asian	0

Source. AISD course enrollment records
Note. All effect sizes < .02. See long report for full data.
* *p* < .05.

What We Learned

For the VAPA team of teachers, 2020–2021 was likely one of the hardest years of their career. Despite all the challenges, VAPA teachers, as a group, were innovative under pressure. They had to learn to teach their art form in ways they probably never imagined they would be asked to do. From that experience, they came away with an increased fluency in using technology to enhance their instruction. Some of these strategies will undoubtedly remain in their instructional repertoire.

Recommendations Moving Forward

- Support VAPA teachers to continue to develop their new skills leveraging technology to support arts instruction.
- Continue to prioritize the involvement of families and extended networks in sharing students' work.

Conclusion

This paper summarized the extensive efforts CLI went through to adapt and persevere through the COVID-19 pandemic. Program leaders converted CT strategies to a virtual format, first through a vetting process and then a cyclical feedback process. The virtual strategies opened new avenues for participation among students such as allowing them more time to brainstorm on their own before presenting an idea to their classmates on video, negotiating the level of desired and feasible social risk-taking, and increasing opportunities to move during times where sitting in front of a screen was the standard. Program leaders also transferred their professional development series for facilitators and hundreds of teachers to the online space, drawing on their established credibility and experience. The virtual sessions increased the trainings' accessibility, were highly rated by participants, and were designed to be applicable beyond pandemic conditions. Most AISD schools managed to continue their pre-pandemic arts partnerships, largely in thanks to either strong pre-existing relationships between CLI schools and arts partners or the creation of the novel Spring Season of Arts Experiences. The VAPA team successfully adapted many classroom activities to comply with the emerging and constantly changing health guidelines in 2020-2021. Possibly as a result of making arts courses more accessible from any location, secondary students in underrepresented groups (e.g., economically disadvantaged, emergent bilingual) enrolled in arts courses at higher rates in 2020 —2021 compared to in 2019—2020. In sum, the long-standing history and strengths of CLI and hard work of leaders and staff throughout the pandemic contributed to the perseverance of achieving program goals despite many challenges. Students benefited, and the arts prevailed.

Petrichor, **Drawing I student artwork**
Erin W., 9th grader, Anderson High School
AISD Virtual Art Show for Visual Arts, Spring 2020
See www.austinisd.org/arts/visual for all student artwork

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