Teaching Children Hope Through Theater: 1812 Productions' Arts Outreach in Philadelphia Public Schools

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Summary

Although deep budget cuts have plagued funding for arts education in Philadelphia, the theater company 1812 Productions has made deep impacts in two of the city's most challenging public schools. They have proven themselves as a dynamic force both in working to bring racial harmony to a high school fraught with violence, and in teaching life skills to students with disabilities. The schools they work with are very different, but in both they teach children lessons of hope for the future.

1812 Productions has a dedicated education outreach staff that provides classroom-oriented theater education designed around the needs of students. They work in collaboration with teachers to develop programs that will complement course curricula while enhancing communication and team-building skills. In addition, they use partnerships with other arts organizations to expand

students' opportunities whenever possible. The secret to their success is that they focus on a small number of students and strive to give them the highest quality experience.

The Problem: The Need for Arts Education in Philadelphia Public Schools

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Philadelphia has a thriving cultural community that brings world-class artists to the city every year, providing an estimated $1.3 billion in annual economic benefit to the region. These cultural activities employ nearly 40,000 people, equating to about $158.5 million in state and local taxes each year (Greater Philadelphia Cultural Alliance 2008). And despite the recession, 7 percent more Philadelphians attended arts and culture events between 2005 and 2009 than in previous years. Compared to other arts and culture events, theater attendance has risen 20 percent, indicating that area theater companies have a bright future (Pew Charitable Trusts 2011).

School children account for about 12.5 percent of all attendance to Philadelphia arts and culture venues (Pew Charitable Trusts 2011), but in order to grow a new generation of arts patrons, children must be further exposed to the arts. In 2006, the School District of

Philadelphia reported that of its 267 schools, 67 did not have a music teacher, and 55 did not have an arts teacher. Many schools only have part-time arts teachers, and arts funding continues to disappear from the city's school budget (Public Citizens for Children and Youth 2008).

Although many of the city's actors, dancers, musicians, painters and sculptors grew up in the Philadelphia area, today's arts education system in public schools raises questions about the future of the city's cultural community. The government failure to provide arts education in public schools has encouraged community arts organizations to address this deficiency. Just as many of these organizations have long valued supporting their local artistic community, they also feel an obligation to extend their resources to support the larger Philadelphia community. Most organizations have limited budgets, but they have channeled their resources in creative ways to bring the most efficient value to arts outreach programs.

1812 Productions was founded in 1997 by Jennifer Childs and Peter Pryor, two individuals with a passion for comedy theater and the desire to serve their community. The company is dedicated to creating theatrical works of comedy and comedic works of theater that explore and celebrate a sense of community, history and humanity. A part of this mission has been a commitment to hiring local artists and support staff. While they started out producing only one show per year, within seven years they had moved to a four-show season.

Childs and Pryor intended to do arts outreach since their company's inception. Each had worked in arts outreach capacities previously and were ready to strike out on their own with their burgeoning theater company. Two years after founding 1812, they started offering discounts to local Philadelphia programs that connected disadvantaged students to the arts. Many of these students could not afford the minimal prices for tickets, so they extended these discounts even further. To make a real difference, Childs and Pryor realized, they had to design a program around a need, so they made a connection with a teacher at South Philadelphia High School. The teacher quickly rallied a group of enthusiastic high school students. Over the years, the relationship with South Philadelphia High School grew as 1812's education staff continued to engage the students in meaningful ways.

The Solution: 1812's Arts Outreach

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There are four key tenets of 1812's approach to arts outreach. The first of these is a focus on classroom-oriented theater education, and the second is to use comedic theater to enhance the curriculum. Comedy gives the children an outlet to express themselves by inviting them to reframe their stories with a sense of humor. 1812's staff has found that when the students are

laughing, they are more comfortable engaging in dialogue.

To bring the program together, 1812's theater staff works with school staff to develop a theater workshop that will complement what the students are learning in the classroom. For example, 1812 works with the Widener School for Children with Disabilities. In Widener's High School Life Skills Class, students learn basic job and interpersonal skills, so the theater staff uses improvisational exercises and ensemble building to reinforce the curriculum's teachings. At the end of each semester, the students have the opportunity to perform theater pieces that they created from these improvisations, which builds confidence and creativity. Many of the students at Widener are in the High School Life Skills class for four to five years, and 1812's staff has worked with many for more than one of those years. Staff members have noted that older students have grown to take a leadership role in the theater classes. The students have become more comfortable performing and helping 1812 teach younger students. Similarly, in 1812's outreach with Widener's younger students, second-grade students learn leadership skills by helping first-grade students in the theater exercises.

The third and fourth tenets of 1812's arts education program are that they have a dedicated arts education staff and that they collaborate with other theater organizations. Many theater companies who conduct arts outreach use their actors and other staff members as

part-time arts outreach instructors. However, 1812 feels that it is important to have a dedicated theater staff so that they can focus their energy on developing superior programs without taking time away from the company's own productions. To help accommodate this, 1812 maintains separate funding sources for their outreach programs. In addition, collaborating with other theater organizations has allowed 1812 to share resources. As a theater company, they do not own their own performance space, so they have worked with other Philadelphia theater companies to use their performance space. Another key component of tactful collaboration is to avoid seeing other nonprofits as competition. Networking to share resources is not only in 1812's own interest but also in the interest of the students they are serving. Together, groups of outreach programs can do more (Crutchfield et al. 2007).

Innovation: Stay Small and Simple, and Develop Strong Relationships

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1812 Productions' four key tenets come together to make them innovative, but in particular they focus on keeping their programs small, simple and based on strong, long-term relationships. Since the programs at South Philadelphia High School and the Widener School are

based on relationships and partnerships, the two schools have greater trust in 1812.

1812's co-founder and artistic director, Jennifer Childs, has been instrumental in fostering and developing the relationships behind this innovation. She is also keenly aware that bringing her staff into two local high schools will help keep 1812 abreast of trends among a younger generation, which benefits her organization as well as the students. Also, she welcomes collaboration with other theater companies to improve the experience for the children that 1812 serves. Sharing her work and ideas with other organizations can help 1812 as a theater company and also as an outreach entity. These are all important tools for innovation and foster a network perspective because they establish various theater organizations as players in a team who are sharing a platform. Because they have a network perspective, they can share resources and offer more opportunities for students (Nambisan 2009). For example, 1812 was working with a group of students from the Widener Memorial School who were all in wheelchairs. Most of the theaters in Philadelphia can only accommodate six viewing spaces for wheelchairs. 1812 was able to bring the Widener students to the Philadelphia Theatre Company's space, which accommodated all of the students for a single show. One of the professional actors in the performance used a wheelchair, and the students had the chance to meet her and get a tour backstage.

When working with the Widener School, 1812 reached out to the Philadelphia High School for Girls for collaboration. A senior art class at Girls High made all of the costumes and props for Widener's end-of-year performance, which helped the students from both schools gain a deeper understanding of each other. Two years prior, a similar collaboration was done with the Young Men's Leadership School at FitzSimons High School.

The outreach programs at South Philadelphia High School have been different but equally dynamic in nature. 1812 has tailored programs in recent years that are intended to celebrate the rich culture and past of the school. The high school has had significant problems with racial violence, so this type of program is particularly important in order to foster a sense of understanding in this highly diverse environment. Student involvement was so great in the 2009-2010 school year that 1812 developed an after-school drama program for the 2010-2011 school year.

Product vs. Relationship Models

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Many arts outreach programs in Philadelphia have been designed on the basis of the provider's own ideas of what the recipients should need. There was little flexibility or meaningful communication about how the arts organization could best meet objectives that could provide a significant experience for the students.

Conversely, many schools have preferred to dictate the terms of arts outreach programs, expecting organizations to tailor a program to the school's ideas.

At the beginning of their outreach efforts, 1812 learned the importance of strong relationships with teachers. While beginning to work with South Philadelphia School, 1812 reached out to four other high schools and offered their services in conducting workshops with students. However, they found little sustainable teacher involvement and the connections to those high schools quickly faded, which could be attributed to the lack of teacher buy-in to the program. The high schools were familiar with other organizations that had brought arts outreach to their schools in the past, but they were not accustomed to 1812's practices. Many teachers lacked the enthusiasm needed to dedicate time to collaborate with 1812's staff in designing a program for their students.

Although these schools welcomed arts outreach programs, they preferred in-school workshops that were separate from the regular school curriculum. This meant that teachers and school administrators had to put little effort into coordinating with local outreach programs. As a result, the schools saw arts outreach as a *product* that was delivered to them, whereas 1812 was interested in developing an ongoing working collaboration. 1812 had already found that their outreach programs at South Philadelphia High School and the Widener School were successful because they were based on *relationships* that

were both flexible and rooted in a desire to meet the schools' needs and the organization's capabilities.

The *product* concept that other high schools held was business-like in nature and appropriate for short-term programs in the schools. However, the model based in relationships was significantly more sustainable because it respected mutual needs and desires. Over time, South Philadelphia High School and the Widener School became more knowledgeable about the capabilities and limitations of 1812, so they were better able to tailor their expectations to what 1812 could provide. As a result, 1812 and the schools could "dream bigger" about the projects that would be available to the students. Also, the teachers involved began to feel a sense of ownership of 1812's education programs, which encouraged them to be dedicated to keeping the programs alive and sustainable. Even when a school went through changes, such as staff turnover, 1812's relationship with both the teachers and administration ensured a strong structure of support within the school to maintain the arts programs.

In contrast, many other arts outreach programs are instrumental but they focus only on the short term, so students see a small slice of a particular art genre. For example, in one Philadelphia public school, a private grant from the Picasso Fund paid for a local artist to work with students to create a photography blog over the course of one semester. At two other Philadelphia public schools, arts outreach programs worked with children to create

murals on the school grounds to celebrate their history and neighborhoods. Other popular outreach workshops in Philadelphia include dance classes that focus on ethnic traditions (Public Citizens for Children and Youth 2011).

Social Impact: The Benefits of an Arts Education

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Research has shown that a child's sustained involvement in arts education can give them a more well-rounded education and encourage them to develop skills to cooperate with others. In high schools with high levels of financial disadvantage, disciplinary problems and high drop-out rates, such as South Philadelphia High School, this is of particular importance because it can help students learn to deal with challenging situations in and out of the classroom. The arts are also beneficial to South Philadelphia High School because they can help teach cooperation and skills to work in a team towards a common goal. Students are better able to recognize and foster the strengths of others in a diverse group (California Educational Theatre Association 2007). In addition, studies have shown that reading, math and oral communication skills have all improved when a child is involved in a drama program for an extended period of time (Public Citizens for Children and Youth 2009).

For children with disabilities, drama education studies have shown that they learn to better interact with each other by learning courtesy and better general peer relations. These skills help them with problem-solving and better managing their emotions under a sense of protection. Later in life, these skills help individuals in job interviews and maintaining employment (Arts Education Partnership 2002).

Social Return on Investment

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It is difficult to quantify the results of any arts outreach program. 1812 Productions has not formally measured the performance of their programs. There are numerous ways to track the benefits that children receive from participating in 1812's programs, such as how many of the disabled students at the Widener School achieved employment after graduating and how drama programs could be used with conflict resolution towards anti-violence efforts at South Philadelphia High School. At the level of staffing, hiring an arts or music teacher in schools that lack them would cost the School District at least $44,000 per year (Philadelphia Federation of Teachers 2011).

Policy Implications

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1812 Productions would probably not have an education outreach program if every school in Philadelphia had a full-time theater teacher. Recent budget cuts in Philadelphia have forced principals to choose traditional academics over arts programs, so arts outreach remains a significant need. However, the City of Philadelphia is trying to address this deficiency by bringing together local arts organizations in order to foster arts programs for children.

Larger nonprofits often formalize their network by establishing an affiliate structure, but because 1812 is small, they rely on less formal ways to collaborate. However, the Mayor's Office has created a city organization aimed at supporting arts across the city in various capacities. The development of the Mayor's Cultural Advisory Council is a signal to the community that the city government is very much aware of the financial difficulties that schools and arts outreach programs face. The main theme is unification, which is especially important during strained economic times. Mayor Nutter feels that the arts are important not only for Philadelphia's cultural landscape, but because they bring revenue into the city. The Philadelphia Cultural Alliance, an arts and cultural membership and advocacy organization, reported in 2008 that the greater Philadelphia region employs 40,000 people and produces over $1 billion in economic activity for the area annually (Associated Press 2009).

The intention of the Mayor's Cultural Advisory Council is

to bring a diverse group of leaders from the cultural community together so they can have input on how public art funding is divided throughout the arts community. Jen Childs is one of more than fifty council members. Not only does the council provide a way for the members to share ideas, it is a collaboration platform that helps break down the barrier between the government and nonprofit sectors (Nambisan 2009). Council membership is yet another way that 1812 stays innovative and on the inside of the world of arts outreach in Philadelphia.

Conclusion

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1812 Productions does not plan to grow their arts outreach program. Instead, their goal is to increase the quality of the programs offered to South Philadelphia and Widener Memorial High Schools. The innovation is to foster existing relationships and keep the programs small. While many nonprofits seek to aggressively grow their innovations, 1812's outreach program sustains itself by being a "disruptive innovation" because it offers "simpler, good-enough alternatives to an underserved group of customers" (Christensen et al. 2006). Disruptive innovation seeks to provide social change by directing investment in a realistic way, which 1812 does by focusing on providing a straightforward arts program while using its arts education budget effectively and efficiently.

First and foremost, 1812 Production is a theater company, not an arts outreach organization. Devoting too much time and too many resources to arts education would diminish 1812's identity, and possibly the quality of their outreach programs. What makes their programs unique is that the students get to experience a living, working theater company instead of full-time arts educators. Students not only learn about drama, they get to see performances that they might never have the opportunity to experience.

In the future, the primary goal for 1812 is to have its own performance space. This would not only benefit them as a theater company, but it also would allow them increased flexibility to provide students with a place to showcase performances, therefore affecting social outcomes at all levels. If their funders support them in this goal, they could provide students with a venue to showcase their performances in conjunction with the students learning about 1812's works in production. More students could not only become patrons of the arts in the future, but they could develop skills that could take them into a career in the arts themselves.

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