



## The Importance of Arts Education

April 23, 2026 AI Summary

[Watch the LEVinar recording](#)

On April 23, 2026, the League of Education Voters convened educators, students, artists, and advocates from across Washington state for a Lunchtime LEVinar centered on a topic that is both essential and often undervalued: **the role of arts education in public schools and communities**. What emerged over the hour was not simply a policy discussion, but a deeply human conversation about identity, equity, belonging, and opportunity.

### Opening with Purpose and Equity

The webinar opened with Arik Korman, CEO of the League of Education Voters, who grounded the conversation in both mission and lived experience. Speaking as a parent of a high school student receiving special education services—and as an advocate shaped by that reality—Korman emphasized that education is a tool for justice. He named how school systems have historically perpetuated racial and disability inequities, and asserted that achieving true equity requires radical change that honors the humanity of every student.

From the outset, accessibility and inclusion were prioritized. Closed captions and Spanish interpretation were available, reflecting the organization's commitment to ensuring that information—and power—are shared broadly.

### Arts Education as a Gateway, Not a Luxury

Korman framed the core tension that would echo throughout the conversation: while the arts are recognized as essential to a well-rounded education, access to high-quality, diverse arts education remains deeply unequal across Washington state.

Students and community members were invited to help tell that story.

### Student Voices: Belonging, Confidence, and Leadership

High school students **Kaden Young** (Ridgeline High School, Spokane Valley) and **Elias Mechelke** (Meadowdale High School, Lynnwood) offered firsthand accounts of how arts and leadership opportunities have shaped their lives.

Kaden spoke about Ridgeline’s Multicultural Night—an arts-centered event that created space for students and families to share culture, music, and identity. What stood out was not just the celebration itself, but what it enabled: deeper understanding across differences, stronger community ties, and a sense of pride among students who often feel unseen.

Over time, arts-adjacent leadership opportunities transformed Kaden from a shy student into a confident youth leader, comfortable speaking with adults, advocating for peers, and helping shape school culture. For him, the arts were less about performance and more about **learning how to communicate, belong, and be heard**.

Elias shared a similar journey. He described how a required theater class—initially taken without much expectation—opened a door he didn’t know existed. Through technical theater, leadership roles, and partnerships with community artists, he discovered both purpose and possibility. Arts education, he explained, helped him understand that learning does not end with school requirements and that professional pathways in the arts are real, viable, and necessary.

Both students emphasized the power of **student voice networks**, particularly through the [Association of Washington Student Leaders](#) (AWSL), where young people collaborate across districts to share ideas, co-create solutions, and advocate for programs—especially those that are underfunded or at risk of being cut.

### **A Statewide Perspective: Policy, Access, and Risk**

From a statewide policy lens, **Miranda Hein**, Executive Director of [Arts Ed Washington](#), painted a picture of both promise and precarity.

Washington state has long been viewed as a leader in arts education policy. State law requires arts instruction for K–8 students in districts of a certain size and mandates that high school students have access to arts courses, including a graduation requirement.

Yet Hein underscored an urgent concern: **implementation remains uneven**, and equity gaps persist across geography, discipline, and grade level. Rural districts, small schools, and marginalized communities are often the least served.

More alarmingly, she shared that the Washington State Board of Education had recently begun discussions about proposing legislation to remove arts graduation requirements

altogether—placing the arts once again in a position of vulnerability during budget and policy shifts.

Despite this, Hein emphasized a powerful contradiction: Washington has the **highest percentage of GDP from the creative sector in the nation**, employing nearly 200,000 people and contributing roughly 9–10% of the state’s economy. Countless students who begin in theater, dance, or visual arts go on to careers in technology, media, game design, and digital storytelling. The arts are not peripheral to Washington’s economy—they are foundational.

And yet, they are too often treated as expendable.

### **Community and Culture as Classrooms**

**Rosie Saldaña**, an art educator at [Heritage University](#) and a working tattoo artist in Central Washington, centered the conversation on community-rooted arts education. In regions like Yakima and Toppenish, she explained, art has always been a vital outlet—even when formal access is limited.

She described how lack of early exposure often leads students to believe art is not a “real” career. Only later—sometimes in college—do students learn about the vast ecosystem of opportunities in museums, design, public art, and cultural institutions.

In response, Saldaña and others have helped create grassroots solutions: artist collectives, pop-up exhibitions in coffee shops, pay-what-you-can workshops, and partnerships with small businesses. The message is simple but powerful: **if you don’t see the opportunity, build it.**

For Saldaña, the arts are also about liberation—liberation from silence, from fear, and from the belief that creativity belongs only to certain people or classes.

### **Expression as Humanity**

Adding another dimension, **Austin Sargent**, Director of Operations at [Speak With Purpose](#), reframed arts education as a shift in how students locate themselves in learning.

In traditional classrooms, Sargent noted, students are often asked to consume information and reproduce it. Arts education flips the script. Through Speak With Purpose, students develop “passion pieces”—self-authored, two- to three-minute speeches about issues they care deeply about, from animal welfare to immigration to gun safety.

The process—reflection, writing, performance—does more than teach communication. It reveals students’ inner worlds, helps educators see their humanity, and teaches young people that their voices matter. Some students go on to perform these pieces at major public events, assemblies, and even professional sports venues, demonstrating that youth perspectives deserve public platforms.

Arts education, Sargent argued, is about placing yourself inside the narrative of your own learning—and by extension, society.

### **Why the Arts Matter Now More Than Ever**

Across stories and disciplines, a central theme emerged: **the arts cultivate skills that every student needs**, regardless of career path. Communication, collaboration, empathy, adaptability, confidence, and critical thinking are not “extras”—they are essential.

Panelists repeatedly highlighted how the arts support students who struggle in traditional academic settings: multilingual learners, students with disabilities, those with social anxiety, and students who express themselves more readily through movement, sound, or image than through writing alone.

In an increasingly polarized world, the arts also create bridges. Shared creative experiences allow people with vastly different backgrounds and beliefs to see one another’s humanity, work through challenges together, and emerge with deeper connection.

### **Imagining What’s Possible**

When asked to imagine a world without budget constraints, panelists envisioned bold but grounded possibilities:

- Arts boards that bring together students, educators, and community leaders
- Universal access to museums, performances, and cultural spaces
- Certificated arts teachers in every school, paired with strong community partnerships
- Systems where student voice is not symbolic, but central to decision-making

And perhaps most simply, they imagined a future where the arts are no longer something students must fight to defend—but something every child can take for granted.

### **Closing with Action and Hope**

As the webinar concluded, calls to action were clear: vote, advocate, partner locally, and keep creating. Adults were urged to support arts organizations financially and politically, while students were encouraged to persist, reach out, and continue shaping the systems around them.

Kaden and Elias had the final word, expressing gratitude for being listened to—a reminder that sometimes, the most radical act is simply believing young people when they speak.

In the end, the conversation made one thing unmistakably clear: **arts education is not about making artists—it's about making whole humans.** And in Washington state, the future of equity, community, and democracy depends on whether we are willing to invest in that wholeness.

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