

# Long Island Pulse

## Art in the Dark

Trending [anna halkidis](#) | May 31, 2017



image: nata\_zhekova

Roger Tilles, representing Long Island on the Board of Regents since 2005, spent about half an hour one day reading poetry to ninth grade students in the Central Islip Union Free School District. But it didn't take long for him to read the boredom on their faces. When he asked how many of them were heading to college, about three hands out of more than 20 shot up.

Feeling discouraged, Tilles was about to leave the school when he was taken aback by a beautiful sound: a choir singing. He sat to watch for about 20 minutes and discovered it was Central Islip High School students rehearsing for a concert overseas in Austria. To Tilles' delight, every single choir student told him they were gearing up for college. But why, he asked them? "We love our chorus and our teacher says we can't stay in the chorus unless we do our work," one petite female student answered.

“That’s the only thing that they did differently than the other students,” said Tilles, the founder of the Long Island Arts Alliance and Executive Vice Chairman of the Tilles Center for the Performing Arts. “I’ve seen it over and over again with the arts...It’s often the thing that makes kids want to come to school.”

President Lyndon B. Johnson expressed similar sentiments when he [signed into law](#) the National Foundation of the Arts and the Humanities Act in 1965. He’s famously quoted saying, “Art is a nation’s most precious heritage. For it is in our works of art that we reveal to ourselves, and to others, the inner vision which guides us as a nation. And where there is no vision, the people perish.”

But President Donald Trump is now notoriously trying to defund the arts. This would have a ripple effect that reaches Long Island where the strong arts scene is boosting the local economy. The defunding would also be a blow for arts advocates who are fighting to strengthen the presence of arts in Long Island schools.

In Trump’s 2018 federal budget plan released in March, he called for the end of four entities that are crucial to our cultural enrichment: the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB).

The NEA and NEH each have a budget of about \$148 million, the CPB receives about \$445 million and IMLS receives \$230 million. Together they make up a miniscule portion—about .02 percent—of a \$4 trillion federal budget. Compare it to other expenses, like protecting Melania Trump and her son in Trump Tower—as much as [\\$53.2 million per year](#)—and the cost becomes even less impactful.

If passed through Congress, the budget cuts would affect the Long Island arts scene. The NEA helps fund New York State Council on the Arts (NYSCA), which gives money to many Long Island arts organizations. This year, [NYSCA](#) granted more than \$200,000 to Nassau County and more than \$700,000 to Suffolk County.

This isn’t lost on Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand, who recently visited the Long Island Children’s Museum in Garden City to emphasize the effect such defunding would have, especially for education. The museum is one of many local cultural hubs receiving funding from the NEA to continue its operations.

“The National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities give local museums more resources to teach students on field trips. And they fund educational programming on PBS beloved by children and their families,” Sen. Gillibrand said in a [statement](#).

Arts organizations subsequently boost Long Island’s economy. A 2011 [report](#) from the Long Island Arts Alliance found that more than 3,000 jobs were generated from these organizations with annual payrolls totaling nearly \$150 million.

Marc Courtade, the executive director of the Huntington Arts Council located in a town with a strong arts scene, highlighted some more economical pluses. “Think of it, if you go to an arts event, you might go to dinner before it, you might go for drinks afterwards,” he said. “It brings people into localities and people spend money in those localities.”

Despite this, legislation has also been making it difficult to keep Long Island arts programs in schools. But that’s not new. In June 2011, Governor Andrew Cuomo enacted a state tax cap leaving several of the 124 public school districts on Long Island in a rut. Districts (excluding Buffalo, Rochester, Syracuse, Yonkers and New York City) are now restricted to a 2 percent tax cap each year or the rate of inflation (whichever is lowest) in the money they can collect from property taxes.

“For a period of time, school budgets were increasing at levels that were unsustainable (6 percent annually),” said Dr. Martin Cantor, economist and director at Long Island Center for Socio-Economic Policy, a consultancy in Melville. “The tax cap worked. It kept property taxes lower and it’s kept school spending lower. It’s forced school districts to make decisions based upon what their needs are rather than just spending money because the cash was coming in.”

In January, Cuomo released a [report](#) stating that the tax cap saved individual homeowners more than \$2,100 in local property taxes through 2016.

But arts education advocates say the tax cap has come at the expense of quality programming in some schools.

“For the last two years, we’ve had property tax caps less than 1 percent increase all over the state,” Tilles said. “When you have that and you have programs that are mandated, it means you have to cut some place.”

Dr. Cantor agrees that schools have seen a loss in programs and teachers, but believes districts can prioritize to keep art. “If art is that much of a demand in a school district, let the school district take the money out of its administration or instructional dollars to fund art,” he said arguing that there are unneeded positions like assistant superintendents.

Yet it’s not so simple for all schools. High need school districts like Brentwood, Central Islip, Wyandanch and Amityville are baring much of the hurdle, said Dr. Charles T. Russo, the president of the Suffolk County School Superintendents Association.

In 2016, the Alliance for Quality Education, Education Law Center and the Public Policy and Education Fund released a joint [report](#) detailing the struggles of certain school districts, including Brentwood. The report explained that from 2008 to 2016 the Brentwood school district saw cuts in programs along with lay-offs of staff like assistant principals. Two years prior, the organization released a [press release](#) revealing the Central Islip School District had also been eliminating teachers.

“Arts are important for all kids, but there’s certainly a definite need for that in areas that are more economically depressed and the property cap definitely hurts those communities more than the wealthier ones,” said Russo, who is also the Superintendent of East Moriches School District. He added that wealthier communities can still generate a large amount of property tax compared to poorer communities.

Poorer students are five times more likely to drop out of high school as opposed to high-income students, according to a 2009 report by Russell W. Rumberger, PhD in [American Psychology Association](#). Graduation rates on Long Island are an indication. In 2016, 94.4 percent of students graduated from Smithtown while only 72.5 percent graduated from Brentwood, according to data from [Newsday](#). The median household income in Smithtown is over \$100,000 compared to about \$77,000 in Brentwood.

A 2009 report from [The Center for Arts Education](#) also found that New York City schools with the highest graduation rates had more access to arts learning than schools that did not.

“If a child is excited about chorus or art class, that child is going to have a much better chance of actually staying in school,” explained Theresa Statz-Smith, the executive director of the Long Island Arts Alliance.

The positive effect of the arts doesn’t stop there. A Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum 2006 [study](#) showed that students performed better in literacy and critical thinking after they participated in a program where artists were sent to their schools “to work with students and classroom teachers on curriculum-based art projects.” An [NEA research report](#) from 2012 also revealed that at-risk students with access to the arts received better grades, attended college at higher rates and were more civically engaged.

The benefits are no surprise to Dr. Deena Abbe, a child psychologist in private practice in Commack who also worked in schools districts across Long Island for about eight years.

“Being exposed to art not only broadens their mind and broadens their viewpoints and helps them be more understanding, but it also helps them understand concepts like math,” she said. “Music is very much math; it’s all fractions and it’s all beats.”

Dr. Abbe said there’s an evident difference between students who partake in the arts and those who don’t. “They are less stressed; they are more easily able to talk about their feelings,” she said.

Paul Chaleff, a respected artist and professor of fine arts, design and art history at Hofstra University for 20 years, agrees. Art, he said, helps students of all socioeconomic backgrounds use the brain to its fullest capacity by challenging it. It also enhances creativity.



Chaleff is used to hearing his college students, many of whom are engineer and business majors, say his ceramics class is the “hardest thing they’ve ever done.” By the end of the semester, they’ve improved their skills, built self-confidence and learned a lesson of perseverance that can be applied to other aspects of their lives.

“There’s a visual manifestation [with art]. They can see right in front of them that if they work hard, they’ll get better. In other subjects, they can’t see that. They know it exists, but here it becomes a reality to them,” he said.

Wealthier school districts on Long Island aren’t struggling in the same way. The North Shore School District, for example, has strong support from the school board, community and parents. Much aid also comes from the North Shore Arts Angels Inc., a non-profit educational foundation established in 2014 that raises funds in the district. The money, raised by membership, parents and donations, brings extra perks like a full instrumental music program and a performing arts exchange program where students get to travel to Europe.

When asked why the North Shore School District hasn’t seen a loss in arts programs, Superintendent of North Shore Schools Ed Melnick said, “Part of that has to do with budgeting and planning and part of it has to do with what the community is willing to support and not support. And the arts have always been a large focus here at North Shore.”

Federal requirements haven’t helped much with the battle. The No Child Left Behind Act, signed into law by George W. Bush in 2002, required math and English testing for students between third and eighth grade and once in high school. Schools and teachers started focusing strictly on preparing students for these tests since they were held accountable if the students performed poorly.

“There was a good reason for it...and that was that English language learner kids and special education kids often would be left behind,” Tilles said. “It put the districts’ feet to the fire, which is a good thing, except they did it in a way that caused so much emphasis on the testing and districts went overboard.”

In 2015, President Barack Obama replaced No Child Left Behind with the Every Student Succeeds Act giving more power to states. It includes the arts as a necessity to a “well-rounded education,” but still keeps the requirement for math and reading testing.

“When a school district or a school board is faced with a decision where there’s only so much money that can go to their programs, they have to meet the required mandates,” Russo said. The tax cap, he added, has hurt districts’ ability to expand programs or introduce unique ones.

A 60 percent vote could override the tax cap in a district. Russo predicted it would be almost impossible to get it in the upcoming school year since the state’s [property tax freeze credit](#) that started in 2014 will give more money back to lower income

households that qualify if districts abide by the tax cap. He was right: all Long Island school budgets passed after voting took place in May.

But there is some good news. In April, the New York State Budget included a \$1.1 billion education boost, giving Long Island schools an additional \$129 million for the 2017-18 school year. Several high need districts are each expected to see a [more than 3 percent increase](#) in state aid, which could give them more flexibility to enhance their arts education.

“The property tax cap is holding a very tight amount of revenue that could be generated for a school district so the money has to be supplemented from somewhere,” Russo said. “The state is coming through with more state aid, which is a good thing.”

The Board of Regents has also been scrambling to find ways to include the arts in schools. It passed new [state standards](#) in April that will require each district in New York to offer students all of the five arts—music, visual arts, drama, dance and media arts—in some capacity. It’s expected to go into effect next school year. The Board of Regents is also working towards developing a pathway for graduation through the arts in lieu of a regent exam.

“The Regents believe the arts are equal to any other academic subject,” Tilles said. “STEM, that’s the acronym for trying to get more kids encouraged into science, technology, engineering and math. We say an A should make it STEAM and the A should be for the arts.”