

NPS K-12 Fine Arts Post-Pandemic Status Report
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This report cannot begin without acknowledgement and commendation given to Newton's fine and performing arts teachers for their flexibility, creativity, adaptability, innovation, and collaboration throughout the pandemic. As teachers of arts disciplines were disproportionately impacted by the mitigation strategies imposed during the pandemic, our fine arts teachers responded by reframing the students' experience through virtual media, not only to deliver instruction, but also to present student art exhibits, concerts, and plays. This approach is antithetical to the traditional experiences that the arts provide to our students and the numerous school communities throughout the city.

The very nature of arts education and the student experience are predicated on public gatherings for art receptions, musical concerts, and theatrical productions. The pandemic paused these essential programs for an extended period, from March 2020 through the start of the 2022-23 school year. The negative impact on the district's fine arts programs, particularly for our elementary music program, has been revealed as we return to typical arts instruction and programming this year. With the arts, athletics, and other extracurricular activities, we understand that for many students, these programs can be a motivational factor for attending school. Restoring arts programs to their pre-pandemic levels is paramount as we continue our return to normalcy.

The following is a status report of Newton Public Schools' fine and performing arts curricular and extra-curricular programs in the 2022-2023 school year. This report will address a myriad of ways that fine and performing arts illuminate the NPS district goals and how they served to support students through the rigors of the pandemic era impact on schooling:

- **Academic Excellence** – Fine and performing arts disciplines have been aligned with state arts content standards since 1995. In August 2019, the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) released its new Arts Content Standards based on national standards for arts education. The district music

and drama programs participate in adjudicated festivals sponsored by their state educators' professional organizations and our music feeder program, that begins in fourth and fifth grade, prepares students for elective music ensembles through high school, where advanced arts students may elect Advanced Placement arts courses.

- **Educational Equity** - Fine and performing arts content includes exposure to artists in each discipline from all backgrounds and ethnicities. Learning experiences are rich with resources and experiences that reflect a diverse student body where all students see themselves being represented. NPS also has a commitment to ensuring access to the various fee-based programs offered in the district. Fee waivers allow the Fine and Performing Arts department to support all students who lack the means to participate in fee-based programs such as elementary instrumental music and middle school drama.
- **Social-Emotional Wellness** - It is commonly accepted that participation in the arts aligns with social-emotional wellness. The arts provide unique experiences and a safe haven for students to be seen and heard. Generations of experience of arts teachers and countless testimonials from parents and students tell the story of how the arts help shape or change a student's life in positive ways.

Throughout this report are numerous links to the resources that our arts teachers generated in the context of a systemic emergency. Following each discipline's findings, you will find select examples of students participating in pandemic-era arts programs.

K-8 Music

Music education was the most impacted arts discipline due to the airborne nature of how COVID spreads and how the mitigation strategies of masking, using instrument covers, using outdoor spaces, and social distancing were implemented. For the remainder of the 2019-20 school year, elementary music teachers developed the [Distance Learning Resource Guide](#) to sustain students' music experiences until the end of the school year. Mitigation strategies throughout the pandemic, however, were unable to be implemented consistently throughout the district due to various factors unique to each school, such as limited access to outdoor spaces or parental reluctance to enroll in instrumental music out of caution. As we entered the 2021-22 school year and the elementary chorus remained on pause, elementary music teachers showed tremendous adaptability to devise [emergency music PD](#) and create a new curriculum for chorus time that emphasized playing percussion and string instruments. Each elementary music classroom received a [classpack of ukuleles](#) and other supplemental classroom instruments

through a generous grant from the Newton Schools Foundation and with ESSER funds. The impact on the districts' music programs is significant and will require systemic efforts to restore curricular and extra-curricular programs to the level of excellence we are capable of. Because the 4th and 5th grade music programs serve to prepare students to elect ensemble music (band/jazz band, chorus, and orchestra) starting in 6th grade, in the 2022-23 school year, the disruption to learning has been observed in the lagging skills of the current 6th grade, but not in the enthusiasm to engage in elective music ensembles.

In the 2022-23 school year, elementary music teachers shared anecdotal evidence of a sharp rise in student performance anxiety leading up to winter concerts. This echoes other reports of an increase in students struggling more generally with anxiety. Despite the desire to engage in these activities, performance anxiety and stress impact students' ability to develop grade-level proficiency in these endeavors.

Impact on Chorus: The extended period of no or limited singing in elementary school caused students to have the greatest lagging skills in choral singing. As we entered the 2022-23 school year, students beginning the 6th grade chorus had not sung in a formal chorus in 4th grade and only had limited singing opportunities in 5th grade. Middle school music teachers have recalibrated the 6th grade chorus instruction to address the students' lack of choral experience.

Impact on Instrumental Music:

- The move to virtual instrument lessons and ensembles suppressed enrollment for elementary beginners.
- Decreased elementary student enrollments in brass and wind instruments and increased enrollments in percussion and string orchestra resulted in imbalances among the instrumentation in elementary and middle school concert bands.
- School-owned instruments that sat idle for several months suffered mold damage, carpet beetle damage, seizing (brass instruments), and string instruments damaged by fluctuating temperature and humidity.

In the 2019-20 school year, NPS began to implement MySchoolBucks to process registrations for the elementary instrumental music program. Here are some [elementary enrollment data](#) from the 2019-20 school year to the present. In 2022-23, we saw a resurgence of enrollment in the elementary instrumental music program and an increased demand among students receiving

financial assistance and using school instruments. The renewed interest in instrumental music has revealed inadequacies in our ability to support students enrolled in instrumental music in the following ways.

- The stock of district/school-owned instruments has become depleted due to aging instruments.
- As enrollments return to pre-pandemic levels, new investments are needed in district-owned instruments made available to students receiving fee waivers in elementary school and require continued support of a district musical instrument in middle school.
- Middle school band ensembles lack an adequate supply of basic instruments for students receiving financial assistance or the advanced instruments required for a quality instrumental music program. Students in 4th and 5th grade have access to six fundamental band instruments: clarinet, flute, alto saxophone, trombone, trumpet, and percussion (snare drum/xylophone), as well as the violin, viola, and cello. As students move up into middle school band and orchestra, the four middle schools currently lack the necessary stock instruments to expand instrumentation beyond the basic elementary instruments that students began with. Orchestras have similar needs for larger size cellos and string basses.

The following are select examples of the virtual formats used to produce music performance videos.

- In the spring of 2020, All-City Treble Singers produced music videos in lieu of their end of year concert, here is [La Violette](#)
- In the fall of 2020, district music teachers communicated an uplifting message with [The Light That Will Lead You Home](#)
- District-wide 5th-grade band virtual concerts, 2021: [Turbo Rock](#), [We Will Rock You](#), [Bile Them Cabbage Down](#)

9-12 Music

As stated earlier in this document within the K-8 Music narrative, Music education, in particular, faced some almost insurmountable challenges where the reality of group/ensemble opportunities was not possible. Then, even upon returning, the realities of distancing, ventilation, and the expense of instrumental covers (masks) posed a significant challenge and delay in regaining progress. Most critically, our choruses needed to remain silent and were

ultimately masked and distanced for a greater period. Despite these challenges, the music faculty at North and South counteracted these hardships through a myriad of creative ways and diverse thinking to keep these programs alive and situated for success. Enrollment in these programs is slowly increasing again. Still, as history has shown regarding elective programs, a significant cut in numbers (often due to budget constraints) or, in this case, the pandemic, can take years to rebuild. Some of our most popular and public ensembles saw their enrollment cut in half upon returning to our first year with in-person learning.

In addition to enrollment numbers, it was clear that the proficiency levels of many of our students were lower than they had been in prior years. Often teachers had to reset the level of music selections being introduced to better match students' skills and establish a new benchmark from which to grow. This is still the case in some areas, but we have also seen that students' overall commitment to the classroom is high, with a strong desire to be in these ensembles and make music together. With this sense of commitment and motivation for this programming, a heightened sense of culture within these ensembles has been occurring at both schools. We have witnessed a wonderful sense of team, similar to our programs and teams in Athletics. When students enter or exit the stage on performance nights, you can see and feel the energy, the care they bring to their craft, and the joy it brings to them and the community they have performed for.

Despite lower enrollment numbers and proficiency levels in some areas, the trajectory for Newton's high school music programs is bright. Examples can be seen in the Newton South Jazz Program, where an unprecedented five of the nineteen-member All-State Jazz Ensemble are Newton South students. Both the NSHS Jazz Combo and Jazz Ensemble were also selected for the prestigious Mingus Festival in New York City, the only Massachusetts groups invited. At North, new opportunities for students are achieving great success. A new program for rock music has allowed students who would most likely not otherwise engage in music at North to learn, express, and showcase their musical skills. This past January, NNHS hosted its first-ever Rock Night, with fifteen or more groups performing. Next year this offering will continue to grow with a new upper-level rock music course called Rock Studio, where students will focus on writing, producing, and recording their own music utilizing the North music lab as well as with experts in the industry with whom we have established positive relationships.

The North and South music programs are looking forward to continuing their trajectory of success now that we are largely past the pandemic. There is still a ways to go, but with the incredible commitment of our teachers and students, along with the continuing support of the Newton Public Schools, we are optimistic about continuing to find opportunities in music that demonstrate excellence and access for all students.

[NNHS Harvestfest Concert 2022](#)

[NNHS Holiday Inspired Concert 2022](#)

[South Music Alumni Holiday Jazz Concert](#)

[NNHS Jazz Night 2023](#)

[2022](#)

[NNHS Rock Night 2023](#)

[NNHS Winterfest Concert](#)

[South Music Fall Festival 2020 Jazz \(pandemic\)](#)

[South Music Fall Festival 2020 Chorus](#)

[\(pandemic\)](#)

K-8 Drama/Theatre

Between March 2020 and the 2020-2021 school year, middle schools adopted a variety of virtual theatre performances. In the 2021-2022 school year, middle schools returned to live performances of plays with limited seating capacity and, in some cases, continued to provide options for patrons to view performances through a virtual format. Elementary schools that elect to produce a spring musical paused these activities during the pandemic, with limited elementary productions in the 2021-2022 school year. In 2022-2023, middle schools resumed full extra-curricular theatre activities, with masking remaining an option for individuals that elect to wear them. Elementary schools that elect to produce a spring musical paused these activities during the pandemic, with limited elementary productions in the 2021-2022 school year.

The following are select examples of the alternate production formats used to mount extra-curricular theatre productions.

- Bowen presented a virtual production of Madagascar, video of the number, [I Like To Move It](#)
- F. A. Day MS drama students developed media arts skills, learning WeVideo to produce its [2020-21 extra-curricular theatre productions](#).

- Oak Hill MS virtual production of [Coronaicles](#), a student-developed original play, [video clip](#), 2021.

9-12 Theatre

South Stage and Theatre Ink were lifelines for students during the pandemic, providing a creative outlet and a sense of community during a time of isolation and uncertainty. As traditional in-person performances were no longer possible, theatre faculty had to find new ways to continue their productions and performances.

In addition to providing a creative outlet, theatre programs also gave students a sense of normalcy and community during the pandemic. Students continued working together on a common goal, and the camaraderie and teamwork that is an essential part of any theatre production helped keep them connected to school and motivated to continue their learning.

To announce that the theatre at North and South has made a comeback would be inaccurate. It never left. Both Newton North and South have returned to traditional stage productions, but in untraditional ways. In May 2020, South seniors were able to share one last performance in the annual [Senior Showcase](#). The company of *Jesus Christ Superstar*, who never got to present their musical due to the shutdown one week before opening, was able to come together in the summer of 2020 to [sing and record a live album and video mixed with one of the final rehearsals](#).

As schools opened in the fall of 2020, North and South theatre programs adapted by transitioning their stage productions to film and television-style offerings. [This involved filming live performances outdoors and then editing the footage to create a final product that could be streamed online](#). A wider audience could view the performances, providing a new level of creativity for the students involved (see [Theatre Ink's 'Community Ink'](#)). Student actors were excited to try screen acting, which requires a different style from stage acting. Our high school technical directors, adept at teaching and mentoring stage designers and backstage crews, pivoted to leading production designers and film crews shooting on location and [live, in-studio shows that streamed on YouTube](#).

Theatre Ink centered the voices of students of color in productions like [Lost and Found](#), and South Stage continues to be a beacon of female empowerment in theatre leadership, as well as a safe space for LGBTQ+ students to learn and grow.

Curricular and extracurricular high school theatre has been a lifeline for students during the pandemic, providing a creative outlet, a sense of community, and a sense of normalcy during a time of uncertainty. The students involved in these programs have been able to showcase their talents, creativity, and hard work to a wider audience, and the experience will stay with them for the rest of their lives.

K-8 Visual Art

Visual art teachers were flexible in supporting students in creating artwork in their homes. For the remainder of the 2019-20 school year, elementary visual art teachers developed the [Distance Learning Resource Guide](#) to sustain students' art experiences until the end of the school year. Additionally, platforms such as Bitmoji were used to create [virtual teacher classrooms](#) and [artist studios](#) to bring the resources of the visual art classroom into a virtual space. A [sketchbook initiative](#) was established to provide students with a portfolio of artwork created at home. [Virtual art exhibits](#) did their best to showcase student artwork to the Newton Community. Back in the classroom in 2022-23, a visual art teacher reported observing unfinished learning in visual art studio skills. For example, many visual art and classroom teachers report that second grade students have difficulty cutting with scissors, a fundamental skill taught in Kindergarten and practiced throughout first grade. Annual school art shows and the Education Center Student Art Exhibit Receptions were suspended during the school closure. In 2021-2022, schools gradually returned to all school art shows at the end of the school year, utilizing outdoor spaces to display student artwork. On December 7, 2022, the Fine Arts department hosted its first public Student Art Exhibit Reception at the Education Center since the last reception, held in the fall of 2019.

9-12 Visual Art

Visual Art classes also provided a much-needed venue for creativity and shared ideas during the pandemic - and very much a place of belonging. These courses continue to be areas where students share ideas and express themselves through painting, ceramics, photography, printmaking, sculpture, and beyond. Of the three arts disciplines offered through the FPA department, visual art is the most populated in both North and South. In the current school year, 1,553 students (809 at South / 744 at North) are enrolled in a visual arts course.

During the pandemic, art teachers created an endless amount of take-home art kits where students, despite being physically apart, could continue to experience as many mediums as

possible. Frequently teachers, administrators, and parent volunteers would help with the delivery of materials to individual homes, including our students residing in Boston. The ceramics teachers devised pick-up and drop-off zones outside the building where students could drop off finished clay sculptures, fire them in our kilns once per week, and then return them to the students for glazing before a final firing. Teachers of photography and 2D art created online venues for students to share work and continue critiques as possible.

Upon returning to in-person learning, new opportunities for study came about. A new animation course started at North, and South added AP Art History so that both schools supported this engaging curriculum within FPA and History. One additional area that is largely positive but has had an unexpected impact has been the WIN blocks offered at both schools. The Art rooms have become some of the most popular places for students to sign up for their WIN experience.

Future Opportunities

Now that we are halfway through the 2022-23 school year and district arts programs appear to be returning to their pre-pandemic enrollment and activity levels, there are key future opportunities that need to be realized to maintain academic excellence, educational equity, and social emotional well-being for NPS students. The following are some of the priorities for a full return to excellence:

- Aligning arts curriculum with the new [MA Arts Curriculum Framework](#) released in the fall of 2019. School districts in Massachusetts have had limited opportunity for fine arts departments to address the new content standards, including the new fifth arts discipline of [Media Arts](#).
- Exploring the new fifth arts discipline, Media Arts. Middle school visual art teachers were the first to receive class packs of iPads allocated to their classrooms in the 2021-22 school year to explore instructional units in Media Arts. Additionally, visual art teachers are exploring visual art applications available on Chromebooks thanks to the district's one-to-one device program.
- Continuing the elementary visual art [sketchbook initiative](#) started during the pandemic. This initiative has continued in most schools, providing students with an additional outlet to develop their artmaking skills.
- Expanding access to the Instrumental Music Lesson Extension Program (MLEP). To ensure greater access to developing student musicianship in grades 5-12, a scholarship fund is needed to support students already receiving financial assistance to enroll in

private music lessons. This would require an initial benefactor and sustainable funding source.

- Supporting the growth of student musicians to move beyond the elementary scope of band instrumentation. As we pivot towards robust participation in instrumental music ensembles, investments in the district's band and orchestra programs are needed to replenish aging and inoperable stock instruments in our schools. During the period from 2015 - 2018, the fine arts department worked with the district to replace and restore our aging pianos. This [proposal for investments in stock instruments](#) for the elementary and middle schools was submitted to the NPS Assistant Superintendent/Chief Financial & Administrative Officer in the fall of 2022 as an assessment of the stock instruments supporting the grades 4-8 instrumental music programs, have been rendered inoperable due to age and other deteriorating factors.

Conclusion

The March 2020 school shutdown eliminated nearly all of the opportunities for students to share their learning in culminating events. Cancellations of musicals and plays, concerts and festivals, and portfolio critiques and art shows kept students from reaching their audiences in the intended ways. Yet our district's Fine and Performing Arts teachers found creative ways to engage and motivate students in a virtual setting.

Despite these challenges, our art teachers have continued to inspire and guide their students, fostering their creativity and passion for the arts. They have worked tirelessly to ensure that our students continue to have access to the arts, even during a time when many in-person activities were not possible.

In addition to their work during the pandemic, our art teachers have also been instrumental in helping our students and communities heal and recover through safe and supportive spaces for our students to process their emotions and experiences.

The Fine and Performing Arts have played an integral role in providing students with a sense of normalcy and continuity during the pandemic. These programs have offered students an outlet for self-expression, creativity, and emotional well-being, which have been especially important during these challenging times.

The pandemic brought significant stress and uncertainty to students' lives, and the Fine and Performing Arts provided stability and purpose. Through participation in music, Theatre, and visual arts programs, students have maintained a sense of connection to their peers and school community. These programs have also helped students develop self-esteem and confidence, which have been important for their mental and emotional well-being.

In addition to benefits to students' mental and emotional well-being, the Fine and Performing Arts have been a lifeline for students' academic performance. The arts programs that often become the draw for students to engage in school have been shown to improve their overall academic performance and critical thinking, problem-solving, and collaboration skills. This is particularly important given the challenges of remote and hybrid learning, which has made it more difficult for students to engage with their coursework and receive feedback on their progress.

As we look to the future, it is clear that the Fine and Performing Arts will continue to play an important role in supporting students' well-being and academic success, and they also have a positive impact on Newton students and the overall cultural, academic, and emotional well-being of our schools. An appropriate level of funding and support will ensure that students have access to the programs and opportunities they need and deserve to thrive throughout their NPS experience and beyond.