



Act One: Partner, Game-changer, Equalizer

“This is who we are. This is what we do. This is why it matters.”

— Geri Wright, Act One President and CEO



By Jennifer Dokes, founder of JDD Specialties and longtime member of The Arizona Republic editorial board

PICTURE IT. YOU ARE A TEACHER IN A TITLE 1 SCHOOL.

People may think they know what that means. They mostly don't unless they've lived the life your students live. You don't have time to paint a picture. You teach in a Title 1 school. There's no time to spare.

You also don't have resources. By definition of the federal Title 1 program, a high percentage of your students come from low-income families. You don't have parents who can cough up extra cash to enhance students' education experiences, not like what higher-income parents do in public schools a few zip codes away.

Your students have less than others, but they still are expected to achieve state standards. You have no doubt about their ability; they're bright and capable. It's *opportunity* they lack.

You know, probably by experience, that the arts open doors of discovery, curiosity, creativity and compassion. These are the qualities employers say they need in the workforce; people who are critical thinkers, who are problem-solvers and who work well with others.

You know about the research stressing the importance of arts education and engagement. Studies show that relevant, meaningful arts education has a tremendous impact on a student's academic performance, social skills and self-esteem. You could make the argument that your students need the benefits of structured school-facilitated arts engagement more than others.

Due to budget constraints, your school no longer has arts teachers. How do you give your students the arts experiences they need? Where in a jam-packed school day do you find time to plan a culturally enriched field trip? Who will pay for admission and bus transportation?

Who can help?

Act One Field Trip Program

The Act One Field Trip Program is a system and a solution for narrowing an opportunity gap that denies low-income students equal access to educational arts experiences. In strategic focus, program implementation and scale, there is nothing else like it in Arizona, perhaps in the country.

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—Geri Wright, President and CEO, Act One

Arts and culture are essential elements of a well-rounded education. Teachers agree that arts enrichment stimulates critical thinking and promotes values that strengthen humanity. So why did schools cut back on the arts?

In Arizona public schools, classroom time is dedicated to learning hard skills that are measurable through standardized tests. Arts experiences that strengthen invaluable soft skills are considered extra, not essential.

Public schools serving neighborhoods with upper-income households are more likely to include arts education in their curriculum. If they don’t, families with means provide arts experiences for their children. In contrast, Title 1 schools where the majority of students qualify for free or reduced-price lunches have limited resources or support. Understandably, the focus of families and Title 1 schools is on teaching standards and meeting basic needs.

Does Act One address education or equity? Yes, and yes.

Geri Wright, president and CEO, says Act One is an education initiative that levels the playing field for children in underserved schools and neighborhoods.

“A child’s education should include exposure to the arts, and because the arts very often are not in Title 1 schools, it becomes an equity problem,” Wright says. “One feeds into the other.”

Leveling the Playing Field

In Arizona, there’s a lot of playing field to level. Of the 1.1 million children in the Arizona public education system, more than 600,000 students attend Title 1 schools.

The Act One Field Trip Program is part of the public education infrastructure in Arizona’s largest population centers. In Maricopa and Pima counties, it is the bridge between Title 1 schools in neighborhoods in distress and hubs of community vibrancy that are performance halls and museums.

By purchasing matinee tickets and arranging bus transportation for field trips, Act One provides the opportunity for an arts experience for low-income students. For many of these children, Act One is the first exposure to high-quality arts enrichment, the first look at a world beyond their neighborhoods. This first impression of arts and culture will produce vivid memories that last a lifetime.

As a partner in Arizona public education, Act One is a game-changer. As a portal for Title 1 school students, Act One is an equalizer. As a one-stop shop for teachers wanting to take students on a culturally enriching school field trip, Act One’s execution of the process is a work of art.

This is who we are.

Inspiring Minds and Hearts

Act One inspires minds and hearts. It does what should be done to help provide all students a comprehensive education that includes the arts.

School field trips are prohibitive for two reasons:

- 1** Bus transportation for school outings is expensive and, for many schools, is funded outside the general budget.
- 2** School priorities are tied to standardized tests. Schools are reluctant to free up time to do anything other than make sure students do well on tests.

In this tough environment for public schools, Act One is what “Yes!” to a field trip looks like.

Act One removes every obstacle to providing arts-related field trips for students attending Title 1 schools in Maricopa and Pima counties. It creates a calendar for teachers to choose events; it pays the price of admission to arts experiences — theater, ballet, symphony, music, museums — and it pays for bus transportation. Act One also provides teaching materials to help integrate the arts experience with classroom instruction. For many schools, Act One also provides classroom books that complement the field trip.

The ease of use strategically built into the Act One field trip system impresses teachers and arts educators, no doubt contributing to the program’s meteoric growth since it began in 2011. But strategy and discipline also enable Act One to build capacity to meet growing demand. The organization is on pace to send about 50,000 students annually on culturally enriched field trips. By the end of the 2018-19 school year, more than 200,000 students will have experienced an Act One field trip.

The Decline of School Arts Field Trips

Arts organizations have seen a decline in students going on school field trips, a former mainstay of public education.

Jay Greene is a distinguished professor and head of the Department of Education Reform at the University of Arkansas who leads studies in culturally enriching field trips.

His ongoing research is enriching the nation's understanding of the educational benefit of arts-focused field trips.

"Part of the motivation for schools to do this type of activity in the past was that they saw themselves as equalizers of access to our cultural heritage," Greene says. "They thought their job was to make these opportunities available to all children, not just to the children whose parents had the inclination and resources to take them. As schools were under pressure to focus more on reading and math test scores, they began to trim or eliminate other activities."

Because schools shifted focus on what they are measured, out-of-school arts experiences became one of the easier things to eliminate. And so they were.

"While systematic evidence on this is a little hard to come by, it seems pretty clear that this has led to a very large, unequal access to cultural activities for advantaged children," Greene says. "[Act One] helps subtract that inequity."

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Breathing New Life into Field Trips

As Act One has worked to breathe new life into field trips, it also strengthens efforts to build audience for arts organizations. Yes, Act One is connecting students to enrichment that will help them become more well-rounded, but it is also delivering to arts institutions a pool of future potential patrons.

The double benefit to students and arts organizations and the potential to grow to national scale is not lost on community leaders like John Amoroso of the David and Lura Lovell Foundation. He calls Act One a "shining example of how the nonprofit sector and communities can be innovative in solving problems."

"The system is the solution," Amoroso says of the field trip program. "The problem is access. Act One is providing that access in a way that's efficient and is solving a problem for both the arts organizations and the schools. It's a really elegant solution."

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Alexis Wilson is an assistant superintendent at Balsz Elementary School District. All schools in her district are Title 1 schools, with nearly all students from low-income families. She recalls a field trip years ago when she was a second grade teacher. The bus was on the freeway approaching downtown Phoenix when students fell silent. The sight of the skyline with shiny office buildings inspired wonder and awe.

"That was such a big 'Aha!' moment for me as a teacher because I don't think I had ever thought they had not seen downtown Phoenix," Wilson says.

She notes that the field trip experience is two-fold: "There is the experience of getting out of your neighborhood, if you don't have that ability to get out



of your neighborhood. But also students have the experience of being exposed to the arts in a way that makes it real or connects them to what they're learning in the classroom each day through the standards."

Act One dramatically improves the odds that students in Title 1 schools receive the benefit of an arts-related experience that should be part of a child's comprehensive education.

"Sometimes teachers will say you have to earn this," Wilson says of field trips. "But they *have* earned it. All children should be able to have these kinds of experiences because it connects what's happening in the classroom, it shows them a part of the world that they may not have been exposed to, it opens up their eyes to things they've never thought about."

This is what we do.

How the Arts Benefit Students

The arts have transformative powers. In a young person, this positive influence has the potential to break down social barriers, spark a passion, and teach flexible innovative and creative-thinking skills that will last a lifetime.

Linda “Mac” and Russ Perlich founded Act One in 2011 on a firm belief that all children deserve quality arts education. Years later, both still regularly attend Act One field trips to see the magic that happens when arts enrichment and education combine.

Russ describes the first time they saw the impact of an arts-based field trip doing what it’s supposed to do. “The most interesting part was watching the students walk out of the Herberger Theater, because they were different,” he says. “They had changed. They had seen something they never expected to see, something they probably never imagined they’d get to see. The kid that walked in wasn’t the kid that walked out.”

Mac added, “With each arts field trip I attend, I am convinced that Act One is filling a void in these students lives. And I am so truly moved by watching the children!”

Professor Greene, a leading authority on culturally enriching field trips, says his research finds arts engagement benefits are related to value changes. Students become more of what the world needs.



“They become better human beings,” Greene says. “They become more tolerant, empathetic and knowledgeable about that specific art content. Those are the results that we’re finding consistently. And those are valuable things. ... We don’t just want good workers, although of course we want good workers, too. But we also want decent human beings, and schools play a role in helping shape our children to be decent humans.”

Inspiring Creativity, Innovation and Understanding

Creativity is in high demand in today’s workplace. Innovation requires an open, inquisitive mind, respect for each team member’s contributions and the ability to

approach problems from various angles. Additionally, successful communities require engaged citizens, and the arts have a prominent role in ensuring young people are actively engaged in civic life.

At the ceremony where he received the 2015 Piper Trust Encore Career Prize, Perlich was asked to share his vision of the future for Act One.

“That’s easy: I’d like to see Act One go away,” Perlich stated. “And Act One will go away when we are providing a quality education inclusive of a viable arts component, and we are providing it for every single student. When that happens, Act One is no longer necessary, and I think we’d all gladly get up and find something else to do.”

Opportunities for engagement with various high-quality art forms help build social and cultural cohesion, which is an element of healthy, livable communities, according to the Live Well Arizona collaboration. Shared experiences through the arts create an environment for understanding and common ground, things that are increasingly important in an era of growing socioeconomic and cultural segregation.

Act One believes that opportunity denied is no way forward, onward or upward for individuals or our communities. The Field Trip Program promotes inclusion for students whose socioeconomic circumstance often spells exclusion in the Phoenix and Tucson metropolitan areas.

“They become more comfortable with surprise, with welcoming the new and the different. They literally grow their capacity to imagine, to put themselves in others’ shoes, to change. They begin their life’s journey from a place of creativity rather than fear — and our hope is that they will stay on that path. What an incredible gift to a young student — both for them and for all of us.”

—Dr. Steven Tepper, Dean and Director,
ASU Herberger Institute for Design and the Arts

Steven Tepper, dean and director of the ASU Herberger Institute for Design and the Arts, talks about how the world unfolds for a child experiencing an arts performance.

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