

\$1.06 million earmarked for arts education in Dallas

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By LAWSON TAITTE / The Dallas Morning News

A \$1.06 million grant to plan the transformation of arts education in Dallas will be announced today by officials of the Wallace Foundation of New York and Big Thought (formerly Young Audiences of North Texas).

Assuming the 10-month research program is successful, the foundation could supply as much as \$6 million more to put the plan into action for all Dallas Independent School District students from kindergarten to sixth grade.

Working with an annual budget of \$4.2 million, Big Thought offers youth arts opportunities, including performances in schools and libraries and after-school programs, through its seven subsidiaries.

The \$1.06 million, said to be one of the largest grants ever made to plan arts education, will enable the organization to evaluate all areas of Dallas students' contact with the arts, including arts instruction and field trips.

It will also seek ways to integrate and improve them.

"Math and verbal scores are nonnegotiable. They're fundamental," DISD Superintendent Michael Hinojosa said of the program on Wednesday. "But the arts are also important. You don't want to forget the whole child. Kids who are involved in the arts end up doing better academically."

The Wallace Foundation, established by *Reader's Digest* founders DeWitt and Lila Acheson Wallace, is one of the 30 largest in the United States, making grants of more than \$44 million in 2004. It spent more than a year deciding that Dallas and New York should receive the two grants for this purpose.

"We in fact conducted an independent search across the country," Wallace director of arts and communities Nancy Devine says.

"The consultant conducted the search with a blank slate. From a list of 26 cities, he reduced it to just a handful that really did meet our criteria," she says.

Ms. Devine says the city needed to demonstrate it was already making progress in connecting schools, arts organizations and other civic groups. Wallace was looking for a local organization, such as Big Thought, that focuses on professional development for artists and art teachers as well as for a community with leadership that would be committed to the project.

School districts' approach to teaching the arts, especially in elementary grades, has changed significantly in the last two decades, says D. Jack Davis, director of the North Texas Institute for Educators on the Visual Arts at the University of North Texas.

"The amount of support varies a lot. We have seen cuts in certain areas, but major growth in other areas," Dr. Davis says. "Some districts that did not have arts specialist teachers in the '90s now have teachers in every school. The legislation says arts must be taught in every school, but doesn't say who will deliver it or how long it will be taught. What we need is the next step."

Dr. Davis believes a study like the Wallace-funded one can be useful in assessing what's really going on – and can help persuade those holding the purse strings that arts education is worth investing in.

"The thing is, we have a lot of anecdotal material about what's happening in schools, but we don't have a lot of hard data or exact research," he says. "We continue to need to work in that arena."

Overall, "the goal is really to bring the arts to more people," Ms. Devine says. "One strategy is to focus on the youth. If we want to bring more people to the arts, we need to build school audiences."

Big Thought executive director Giselle Antoni says the study should help answer many questions, including "who has access to the arts and why. We talk about it all the time, but we haven't found a way to engage the disinclined. Nobody has.

"We need to know which children have access to the arts through family life, school and after-school programs," Ms. Antoni says. "If they don't have access, how much of it is supply, how much demand? Why is that dynamic happening in our community? How should we be talking to the members of our community about the values of the arts? How do you talk to those people who aren't interested in the arts?"

After 10 months of research, Dallas should have a plan. At that point, the Wallace Foundation "will consider funding implementation of that plan," according to Ms. Devine.

Ms. Antoni says that in comparable projects, the foundation had contributed as much as \$6 million over six years. She also says the Ford Foundation donated \$570,000 over the last three years to lay the groundwork for the new plan.

In addition to the money, the Wallace Foundation will also provide technical resources, research and consultation.

"From the arts community perspective, I am so excited," Ms. Antoni says. "We are able to keep so many artists in town with meaningful work, so they don't have to wait tables. We can really raise the profile of the arts in the community with this money."

Staff writer Kit Lively contributed to this report.

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Under the umbrella

Big Thought says it annually reaches an audience of 400,000 through its seven programs:

Young Audiences of North Texas Offers arts performances, workshops and residencies in schools.

Library Live! Offers arts and reading programs in area libraries.

Dallas ArtsPartners Provides arts and cultural resources to Dallas public schools.

Creative Solutions Offers skills-building arts programs to "at risk" teens.

Kennedy Center Imagination Celebration at Dallas Offers programs and professional development sessions to families and educators.

North Texas Wolf Trap Artist-educators teach caregivers to prepare kids to read.

Make a Connection Thru Art

Local partner in Nokia Inc. program that encourages kids' artistic expression.

Online at: http://www.dallasnews.com/s/dws/ent/stories/DN-grant_0106gl.ART.State.Edition1.1dab3508.html