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Rochester Area Community Foundation Offers New Funding to Expand Youth Arts Access

A new funding opportunity launched this month by Rochester Area Community Foundation aims to help more students engage with the arts. The new grant cycle — open now through March 28 — will award grants of up to \$10,000 to organizations that provide programs in visual arts, music, dance, and performance to PreK-12 students in Genesee, Livingston, Monroe, Ontario, Orleans, Seneca, Wayne, and Yates counties.

“Our children deserve to have access to vibrant arts opportunities across our region,” says Community Foundation President & CEO Simeon Banister. “At a time when federal funding for the arts is changing, our focus is to protect youth arts access...here.”

The Foundation has been in the business of making grants for over fifty years, but Senior Program Officer Annette Jiménez Gleason says, “What we’re doing with this Arts Education funding is really unique.” In an open call for applications, the Foundation stated three goals these grants are intended to address, while giving nonprofits flexibility in deciding how their specific program will use the money to meet them. Those goals are 1) expanding geographic access to PreK-12 arts programs, 2) making program access more equitable, and 3) increasing students’ engagement, enjoyment, and passion for the arts.

An analysis of previous Arts & Culture grant applications to the Community Foundation found that less than 10% of the proposals were from nonprofits that serve the counties outside of Monroe. Since the Community Foundation is committed to strengthening regional vitality across eight counties, this pointed to an opportunity to connect more intentionally with programs in other parts of the region — a targeted approach that has become a key part of the Foundation’s outreach strategy in the past few years.

The need for flexible dollars was another key insight that shaped the Arts Education grant program. Traditionally, grants that can be spent with few restrictions are hard to come by, because funders find it difficult to measure the impact of their investment. However, in a focus group with arts grantees last year, the Foundation heard an urgent need for dollars without restrictions. This led the Foundation to pursue a different approach to measuring the impact of these new dollars.

The Arts Education grant opportunity invites applicants to ask for whatever they need to meet the goals — whether that’s money for transportation and food to make it easier for kids to stay in the program, or specific staff training and equipment to help better engage young learners. For this flexible approach to still produce actionable insights, the Foundation is partnering with grantees on evaluations at the end of the grant window, a little over a year after money goes out the door.

All grantees will be asked to report on a few outcomes: such as the number of program slots, hours of operation, and program attendance. The students in their programs will also be asked a few questions to get data that only the learners themselves can provide. If you’re wondering how to get a kindergartener to complete a survey, Cameron Caputi, Director of Community and Foundation Analytics will be a resource to each nonprofit who receives a grant, helping measure the impact of this approach.

With experience designing evaluations for the Rochester City School District, Cameron knows how to write questions with age-appropriate language and prepare for different collections methods to suit each program. “If you’re awarded this grant, we’ll be talking,” says Cameron on a recent [webinar](#) for interested applicants. “We’ll work with you to figure out the best way for this to happen.”

Learnings from the first set of grantees and their program participants will help refine how this funding is structured in the future. “We’re really looking to partner with grantees and see what we can learn from this process,” says Annette. The Foundation hopes to continue making this funding available in future years. “It might just look different based on what we learn. The data we get from grantees will help make the case for this kind of funding to continue in the future, and hopefully make the pot bigger.”

The dollars available through the Arts Education cycle are separate and additional to the Foundation's existing Arts & Culture grants offerings, which closed in November.

Applications for Arts Education grants are open now through March 28. For more information, visit racf.org/artseducation.