

BIPOC Arts Network & Fund

Arts Education Landscape Exploration Project

Houston, TX

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In Collaboration with
Arts Connect Houston
& Eepi Chaad



A word from our Director

Friends, Colleagues, and Community,

When we launched the BIPOC Arts Network and Fund in September of 2021, we focused on investing \$2M of unrestricted resources to support arts organizations and arts collectives/projects through the COVID-19 pandemic. We were also intent on distributing resources in ways that centered equity, community voice, and care in a moment of crisis.

As a network built by artists, organizers, community leaders, arts professionals, and philanthropic partners, we understood that responsive and responsible investments could transform the possibilities of the BIPOC arts ecosystem. Guiding principles to our work include listening to those with direct knowledge and resourcing those most affected. We intentionally describe resources to include direct funds, a connected network, and shared learning. Please go to HoustonBANF.org to find out more about our programs and grantees.

Through the first round of applications, we realized many of the BIPOC arts organizations who applied shared a commitment to arts education. After that first round, BANF wanted to explore how support for BIPOC arts organizations and artists could also support BIPOC K-12 student success. To launch this exploration, we chose to work with [Arts Connect](#), which already had a strong network of organizations and a considerable data set for student needs. We hoped this partnership could build on their dataset and contribute to their advocacy efforts as informed by the current realities of arts organizations and teaching artists acting as arts education providers.

Further, we recognized COVID radically changed the landscape for arts organizations, artists, and school districts, so we built a process centered on learning and adaptive practice. The following report helps to encapsulate the process and learnings when we engaged grantees in a space of inquiry and possibility:

What happens when we bring content experts together with a charge to envision a future that supports BIPOC artists and arts organizations that are focused on student success?

We are grateful to all our funders and community partners who joined us on the journey and made the opportunity possible. I want to particularly celebrate our thought partners at Powell Foundation, who committed to an adaptive community design process. The willingness to invest the time, shift timelines, and build a space for connection allowed for responsiveness to the evolving Houston public school situations and expanded possibilities among those we gathered.

BANF is a learning initiative and we built Learnings.HoustonBANF.org to share our processes and findings. The website and this report are part of our commitment to learning, adaptation, and sharing so that others can help refine the findings, build on them, and support solutions where we cannot.

I hope you find inspiration to catalyze action-oriented dialogue. Thank you for supporting and building a thriving BIPOC Arts Ecosystem in Greater Houston.



Sixto A. Wagan
BIPOC Arts Network and Fund
Project Director



KINDER FOUNDATION

The BIPOC Arts Network and Fund
is grateful to the partnership and support
of these visionary foundations:



Project Overview

In 2023, the BIPOC Arts Network & Fund (BANF) launched a multiphase initiative to explore barriers that BIPOC led arts organizations in Houston have faced in providing arts education programming to K-12 audiences and how these organizations can be supported in engaging in this part of the landscape.

Historically, BIPOC led arts organizations have provided less arts education programming for K-12 students than other organizations. The BANF Arts Education Landscape Exploration project addresses this issue with a specific lens on the Greater Houston community through the engagement of a cohort of leaders from BIPOC led arts organizations who were given time and space to share experiences, contribute to collaborative ideation, and think about alternatives to current systems. The cohort was not charged with creating specific solutions, but rather to spend dedicated time together developing visions of the future of engaging in arts education for the BIPOC arts community in Houston.

This project was embarked upon at a time when the future of the Houston Independent School District (HISD), the largest school district in the Greater Houston area, was uncertain and a Texas Education Agency (TEA) takeover was looming. During the course of the project, the state did indeed enact a takeover of HISD. Many factors for future engagement for in-school programming were undetermined at this time. The cohort was charged with exploring possibilities within the lens of engagement with the district as well as beyond these parameters.

Primary objectives include:

- Explore the current arts education landscape in Houston for K-12 audiences
- Investigate in-school arts education access and barriers in Houston ISD as well as out-of-school engagement opportunities
- Explore BIPOC representation in arts education programming
- Provide support and dedicated time and space for BIPOC leaders to connect, collaboratively ideate, and dream of new possibilities
- Provide community recommendations for a future BANF Arts Education Pilot Project

BANF Arts Education Cohort Selection

Building a cohort of arts & culture leaders that would be representative of the Greater Houston arts education ecosystem required a multitude of considerations. Factors for ensuring organizational diversity included a broad view of geography across the city. It is worth noting here that the city of Houston encompasses an area that is larger than six states in this country. A cohort that represented varied artistic disciplines was also key. This factor was assessed through the lens of art form and medium as well as cultural representation. The cohort also represents a wide variety of organizational scale (referring to full-time, part-time, and contract staff), annual operating budgets, and years in operation.

Perhaps the most important factor when considering organizations to participate in the thinking/design cohort was the history each organization had with providing arts education

programming. There is a spectrum of experiences with direct and indirect arts education ranging from in-school arts integration programs with decades long engagements to out-of-school arts instruction to art as a vehicle for intervention.

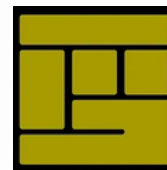
Careful thought was placed in determining factors to ensure diversity but also in establishing common traits and values among the organizations included in the cohort. Each organization in the cohort has a mission framed in community focused work and a deep connection to the community in which it is embedded. Each organization is engaging the arts as a conduit and connection point to a larger framework of community building.

While institutions are bearers of both history and culture, they are also only as strong as the individuals who dedicate their time and energy as staff. The people behind the institutions were also a component of the selection process. Attention was given to identifying organizations with leaders who already had a history of leadership within their respective communities and who have the capacity to be an exponential catalyst for intentional growth in Houston.

The identified leader from each organization was invited to serve as the primary representative in the BANF Arts Education cohort. The individuals in the cohort served as representatives of their respective institutions and as BIPOC arts leaders and creatives who are valued for their unique experiences and personal perspectives. These individuals were charged with sharing the work in the cohort with their teams, to bring in other voices from their organizations into the work, and carry the learnings from the process back to their communities. These individuals were also challenged to consider the platform of the project as an opportunity to envision their role as leaders in the community through expanded breadth and form.

BANF Arts Education Cohort Profiles

Cohort members were asked to commit to the multi-phased process and the organizations were compensated for the time dedicated to this work. The cohort included Brian Ellison (The Black Man Project), Michelle Tovar, Ed.D. and Desmond Bertrand-Pitts (Buffalo Soldiers National Museum), Aisha Siddiqui (CHAT), Charity Edison Carter (Edison Arts Foundation), Armando Silva (MECA), and Elijah Alhadji Gibson (Social Movement Contemporary Dance Theater).



Follow [this link](#) to see the full cohort profiles.

Project Partners

In addition to the individual members of the cohort and their respective organizations, this work is supported through investments and community partnerships. The development and implementation of this project are a collaboration between BANF, [Arts Connect Houston](#), and independent consultant [Eepi Chaad](#). Arts Connect Houston was contracted as a partner due to the established relationship with HISD as well as a long history of investment in and support of arts education for K-12 students. Eepi Chaad was contracted as an independent design partner and project facilitator based on an extensive experience in the field of community arts education.

Process & Timeline

The time during this nine month period was approached in two phases: Thinking & Design. The Thinking Phase took place between January-May and was focused on collaborative information gatherings and framed around reflections of the lived experiences of the cohort. The Design Phase took place during June-September and was framed around collaborative and individual brainstorming exercises that built on the work in the first phase.

The BANF Arts Education cohort came together for seven in-person meetings between January and September of 2023. The cohort meetings were designed by lead facilitator Eepi Chaad, independent artist, and co-facilitator Taylor Bush with Arts Connect Houston. Sixto Wagan, BANF Project Director, also joined the majority of the meetings as a passive cohort participant and provided grounding touch points throughout the process. In addition to in-person meetings, the cohort was provided with modes of asynchronous digital contribution. A number of one-on-one conversations were also conducted between the cohort members and the facilitation team.

The charge for designing the phases was to build a framework for experimentation. The starting place was one of hope and an established community agreement was to allow for collective reflection to continue to inform the process. The space was deliberately collaborative and conversational with space to explore and to determine the direction of the cohort work throughout the process; all meetings were structured to hold space for adaptation of future steps based on the direction of the cohort exploration. The intention throughout the process was not outcome based, but rather the design was informed by a hypothesis that when proven leaders are given trust and space for dreaming and creation that they in turn will make space for future dreaming and creation.

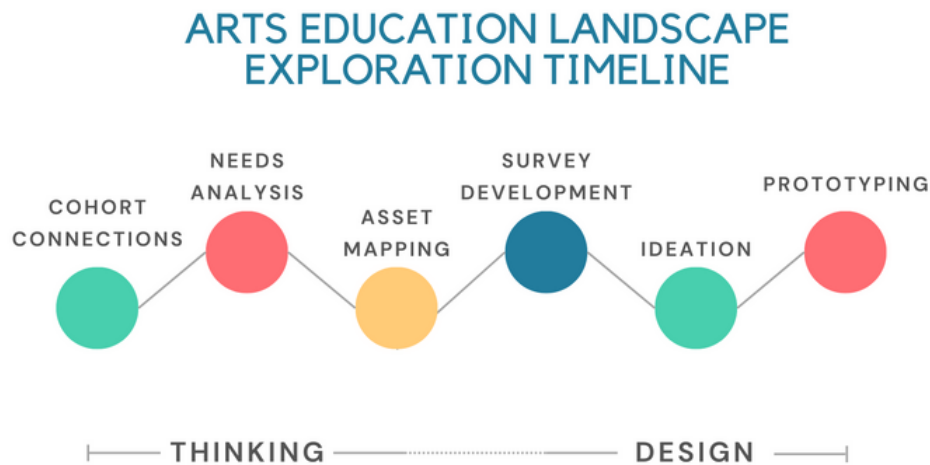
Methodology

A collaborative thinking space required flexibility and the opportunity to allow for organic growth in ideas and personal connections. An in-person meeting structure was established with the intention of fostering relationships and trust building among the cohort members as well as with the facilitation team. The cohort was led through a variety of visioning and design exercises that included asset mapping, critical questioning, and prototyping charrettes. A survey co-created by the cohort based on the findings from this phase was distributed among

BIPOC led arts organizations in Houston to serve as a check to the work created during the in-person sessions.

Phases of Exploration

The nine month period during which the cohort met was delineated into two phases to support dedicated time to share and to dream. The Thinking Phase allowed for time to establish a shared understanding of the current arts education landscape in Houston through an invitation to the cohort to share their experiences through both personal and organizational perspectives. During the Design Phase, the cohort was challenged to take action utilizing the collaboratively compiled learnings to inform a series of brainstorming charrettes that took the form of examples of project ideas.



Thinking Phase

All too often in the arts fields, BIPOC led organizations are asked to work within systems that have been established without specific considerations for the communities they inhabit and serve. The Thinking Phase was designed to allow the members of the cohort to have time to think critically about the current systems within the arts education landscape and also to view the field through each other's perspectives. The cohort was asked to take part in needs assessments, visioning exercises, and to develop a survey in collaboration with the facilitation team. This period included research and regular updates from Arts Connect Houston on the status of HISD. The cohort was encouraged to share organizational and individual experiences in the field as it pertained to barriers and issues of access as well as successful program models. An important part of this phase was maintaining a lens on representation within K-12 programming through both investigating professional pathways for BIPOC teaching artists, educators, and administrators as well as the development of culturally inclusive curriculums.

It became clear during this process that room to dream without an intention towards specific outcomes was not a common occurrence within the field. Members of the cohort were asked

that they come to the shared space “with their whole selves,” mindful of their individual and institutional perspectives. They were also asked to stay flexible in their dreaming and engage in abundance thinking as well as generosity with one another. The space was not designed to be agenda driven or solutions oriented, but rather to allow for open thought and sitting with ambiguity as a pathway to radical thinking.

Needs Assessment

In the needs assessment portion of the Thinking Phase, the cohort was asked to actively work together through the lens of dismantling the scarcity mindset. Asset mapping was explored as an exercise in evaluating the strengths within BIPOC communities that are both clearly identified and sometimes overlooked.

	People	Values	Orgs	Places	Tools
Strengths & Assets	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Curriculum Specialists, HISD • Aldine District • Department Directors, HISD • Historians & Artists • Mayor • Senate House Representatives • State Representatives • Arts Educators & Admins • Houston 2036 • Houston City Council Members • Health & Human Services Dept. • Judges • Families (low income families) • GHP • Veterans • Port of Houston • Real Estate Developers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rituals & Celebrations • Intergenerational Connection • Family Values • Tradition • Faith • Religion & Spirituality • History & Culture • Connecting to roots • Authenticity • Cultural significance • Language • Equity, Access, Inclusion • Belonging • Respect 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Artist Networks • Community Networks (Fam & Friends) • Metro - transportation • HEB • Food pantries • Community Gardens • Social Justice Orgs • Environmental Justice Orgs (TEJAS) • Churches • Corner Stores 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parks • Multi-Service Centers • Empty Classrooms • Schools after hours • Local Businesses 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Volunteers • Language Access/Translations • Free breakfast programs
Gaps & Barriers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fine Arts Teachers • Mental Health Professionals • Funding Partners • Judges • Real Estate Developers • Cultural 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access to healthcare • Access to High Quality Ed • No time for arts ed • Art is for white people • Art does not pay the bills • Art success is for the 1 in a million • Survival mode to thriving • Educating the oppressor is not our job 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advocacy • Misconception of economic value of art • Trust outside our BIPOC communities • City's full support • Mental Health Orgs • Medical Clinics 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Museums & Cultural Spaces (w/ Tickets) • GRB & other city spaces 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Broadband • Block Leaders • Technology labs • Coffee Shops • Heating/AC in homes • Safety (non-police) • Connection to community

Click Image above to to access the full asset map document

The cohort concluded the needs assessment portion of the journey with a critical questioning session to challenge existing problem solving skills and to ideate through an investigative lens, which also included an in-depth discussion on existing arts deserts in HISD. The conversation also served to inform the production of the community survey.

Arts Deserts

During the Thinking phase the cohort also discussed its effectiveness in supporting HISD campuses that would also be considered an arts desert -- a campus with zero certified Fine Arts teachers or a campus with an off-balanced student to Fine Arts teacher ratio. The cohort discussed the gaps and issues that arise when an arts desert is present, its impact on students and how to navigate building partnerships on campuses in this position, if at all.

Visioning

The visioning sessions built upon the needs assessment work. The cohort used the asset map as a tool as the questions posed by the group during critical questioning session were reviewed for actionable steps. The cohort was challenged to address only the questions that were specific to arts organizations and their interest and capacity in providing arts education programming. Other questions were categorized for the various community stakeholders for whom the issues were pertinent, whether that be local government officials, school districts, educators, non-arts community organizations, families, or the community at large.

In a free flow brainstorming session, the cohort independently created ideas that were informed by the learnings to this point while also considering **three guiding questions**:

- What do BIPOC arts organizations need to serve students with arts education?
- What can addressing these areas look like in practice?
- What are the needs we can solve for?

The cohort was asked to determine markers of success, from their perspectives, in effecting the arts education ecosystem. The ideas were then presented and discussed in a group. The ideas that resulted from this session were collected for the purpose of revisiting as a grounding exercise during the Design Phase.

Thinking Phase Learnings

Throughout the asset mapping and critical questions exercises, the cohort identified community based organizations and spaces as strengths to be utilized in developing new approaches to arts education for students. This was coupled with a growing sense of uncertainty in future engagement directly with HISD and informed the brainstorming session and following conversations. The ideas that were presented across the cohort leaned into arts education programming that utilized community partnerships as an alternative to in-school programming.

Recurring themes during this period included:

- Capacity building
- Training and mentorship
- Peer support groups
- Affinity groups for arts educators
- Cross disciplinary support spaces
- Giving to givers
- Mental health support access
- Cultural sensitivity
- Cross-collaborations (arts & beyond)
- Providing pathways to other resources (food, medical/dental/mental healthcare, safety, etc.)

While the arts ecosystem is finite in Houston and many organizations are well known, it became apparent through the first sessions of the in-person meetings that the leaders in the cohort were often occupied so heavily with the day-to-day operations of their own institutions that little time was left to engage with colleagues in the field. Though many were aware of each other's organization and their work, most of the cohort members did not have more than a passing relationship with each other at the onset of this project.

This work led to strategizing greater resource sharing as a pathway to bridging barriers within arts education, specifically for BIPOC arts organizations. A primary learning is that the capacity for artists, educators, and arts administrators in BIPOC communities to connect with one another across disciplines and geographic boundaries is integral to building a reserve of accessible community assets, ideas, knowledge, and connection. This flexible network of individuals and organizations has greater adaptive capacity to operate outside of existing systems that currently do not serve BIPOC communities, providing students with additional support through their peers and community.

Design Phase

The Design Phase of the work was framed around survey design and implementation, collective brainstorming, project prototyping. The exercises were approached with curiosity and a notion of discovery. The goal was not to develop a specific product but rather to investigate and to explore what is possible when communities are resourced and leaders have time to dream.

During the Design Phase, the cohort utilized the information compiled earlier to inform a series of brainstorming charrettes that took the form of examples of project ideas. The charrettes also served as a vehicle to further illustrate success models that are reflective of where BIPOC communities are in Houston today. These learnings from this process have been provided as community recommendations for a future BANF Arts Education Pilot Project. This sequential process was designed to utilize the time with the cohort to experiment with ways to provide BIPOC arts administrators with opportunities to see themselves as connectors and leaders in their fields as well as in the landscape of Houston.

Survey

Since 2018, Arts Connect Houston has collected data documenting student engagement in arts education across HISD using the artlook®. Made possible through a data sharing agreement with HISD, each campus in the district receives an annual survey where they may opt in to share information about fine arts classes and partnerships offered on their respective campus, the number of certified fine arts teachers on campus, as well as arts education opportunities available to students through partnerships with arts organizations. Conversely, area arts organizations who are part of the Arts Connect collective are asked to maintain and annually update artlook® profiles which list partnerships with campuses as well as programming offered. Through this longitudinal data, Arts Connect has tracked changes in

access to arts education including mapping arts deserts -- which the cohort discussed during the Thinking phase.

For the Landscape Exploration Project, Arts Connect developed the arts education landscape survey directly from the inquiries the design team posed in the critical questioning session. The facilitation team focused the questions specific to arts education from conversational to data gathering format. The cohort members vetted, refined, and tested the survey before launching it publicly. The survey included demographic, open-ended, and scaled questions as well as two pathways based on whether organizations were currently providing arts education programming.

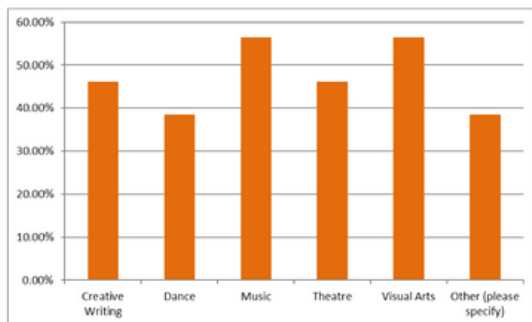
The survey was distributed among past BANF grantees as well as self-identified BIPOC led arts organizations within the Arts Connect Houston Collective. The cohort members were also encouraged to share the survey with those in their networks who may not be in the aforementioned groups. A total of 39 leaders, administrators, and teaching artists from BIPOC led arts organizations around the Greater Houston area submitted responses to the survey. The results of this survey when viewed in conjunction with data collected through artlook® by Arts Connect allows for a view of the effects of the pandemic on the community. The combined data sets deepen understanding of the arts education landscape through BIPOC perspectives.

Arts Education Landscape Survey Report

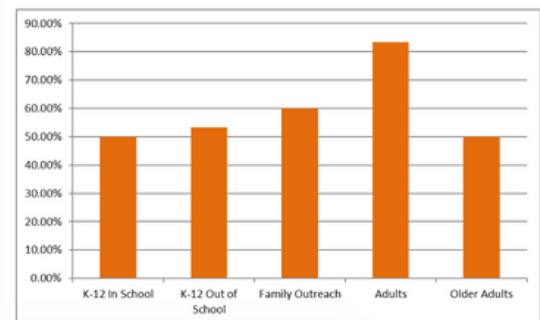
[Click link above to view full survey report.](#)

Snapshot of Survey Outcomes

What arts discipline(s) does your organization support and present?
(Check all that apply.)



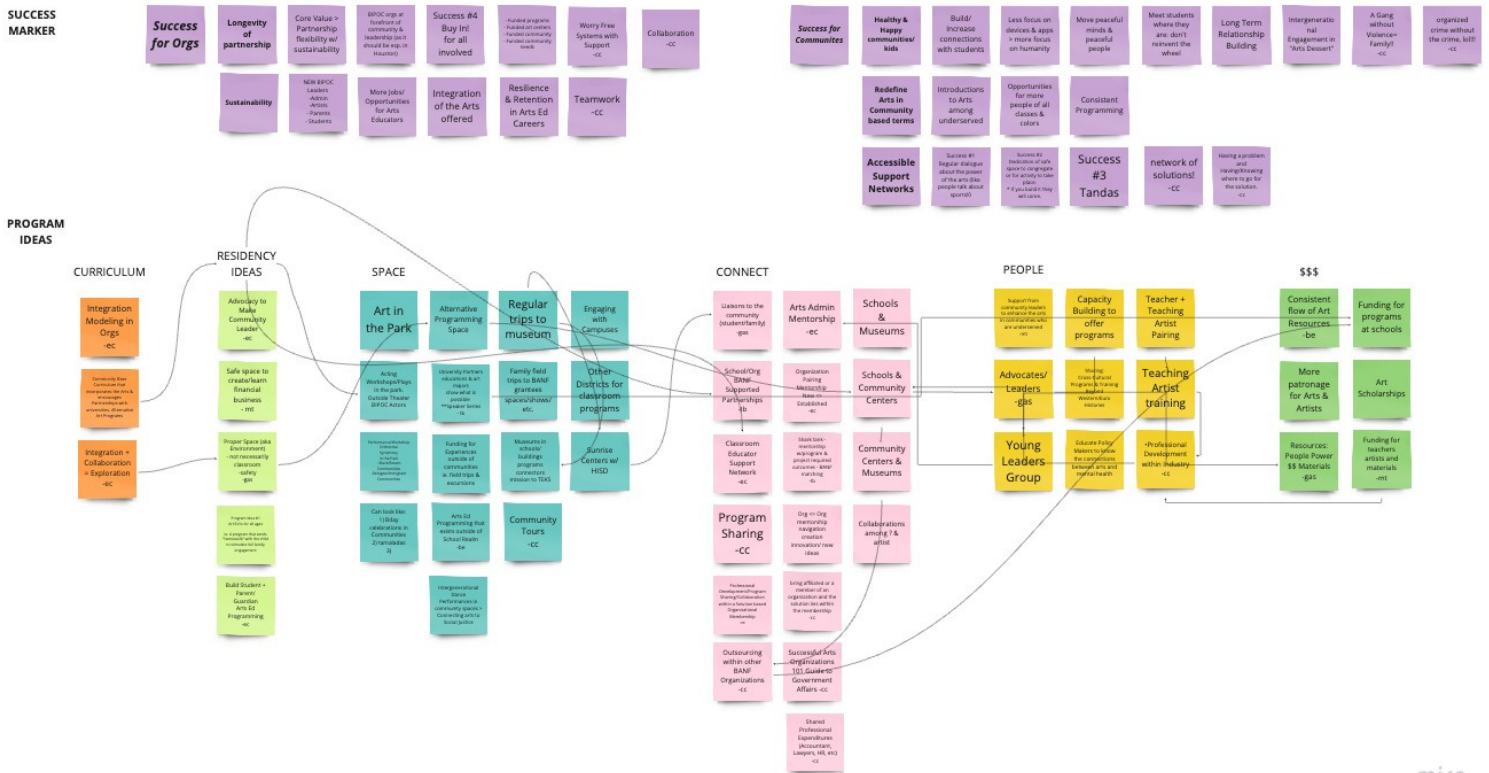
Who is your audience for arts education programming?
(Check all that apply.)



These learnings were employed by the cohort as a resource and wayfinding tool during the design exercises to ensure that ideas were aligning with community visions and values. The results and specifically the narrative responses in the survey directly impacted the direction of the ideation and prototyping exercises and influenced the evaluative lens with which the cohort considered their work. The results confirmed many of the hypothesis statements made in the prior sessions and serve as supportive context to the experiences shared in the collaborative sessions.

Collective Ideation

The brainstorming process that occurred in the Thinking Phase was revisited through both individual and collective work in the Design Phase. The cohort came together to make connections amongst the ideas and evaluate their findings from the visioning stage in the Thinking Phase. The intention for this exercise was to collapse established models of program development and imagine possibilities for new partnerships and resource sharing across communities.



Click Image above to to access the full ideation document



Detail from Ideation Document: Redefining success for BIPOC Arts Organizations

Project Prototyping

Design charrettes to prototype project ideas were used as a generative exercise for the cohort to expand upon their collective ideation work. The cohort was provided with prompts and a simple framework within which they were asked to create arts education programming ideas. The initial prototyping was conducted in pairs and each cohort member worked in multiple pairs to ensure that collaboration across perspectives was established at every step.

Example Project Prototype:

Bridge SANKOFA - "It takes a Village!"

<p>WHO:</p> <p>Youth Elders</p>	<p>WHAT:</p> <p>Creating programming that allows for intergenerational correspondence, connections, and holistic growth!</p>
<p>WHEN:</p> <p>Ongoing Work Longevity is Key</p>	<p>WHERE:</p> <p>Community Centers Churches Homes/Apartments</p> <p>Not a special place... But "Special" happens here!</p>

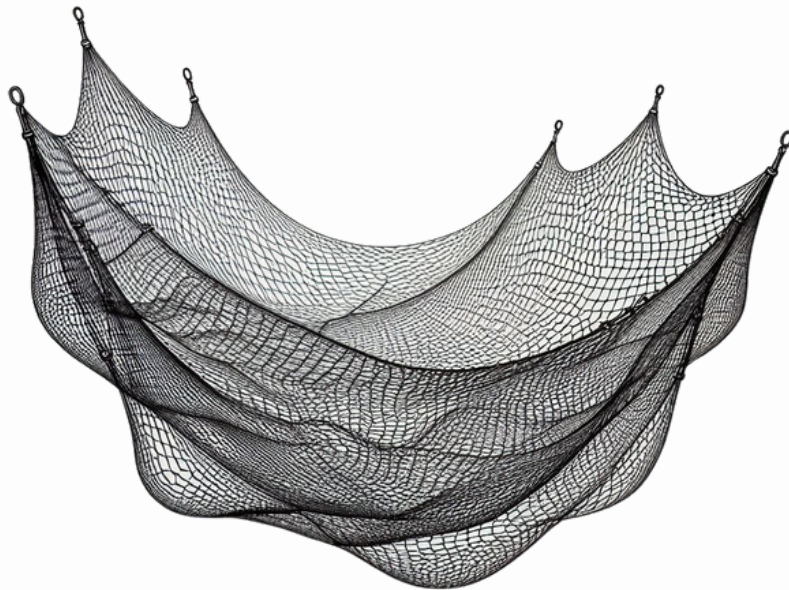
Each prototype was co-authored by two cohort members to maintain a balance of perspective.

The provided framework asked the cohort members to think of what is possible when resourcing a project is not a primary concern. Considerations included audience, provider, prospective partners, location, and program length and frequency. Cohort members then evaluated and provided constructive feedback on an individual basis. The prototyping process concluded with a group discussion of the strengths and gaps within the findings.

Learnings

While the focus of this phase remained arts education, the results of the various design exercises had one major takeaway and two themes.

The project prototypes and phases consistently leaned toward community-focused outreach that did not center on in-school engagement. Instead, the project prototypes leaned on auxiliary spaces such as community centers, places of worship, and publicly accessible spaces. Arts organizations continue to have unreliable access to collaboration with schools due to changing protocols within the district, barriers to establishing and maintaining vendor status, and lack of support on campus when programming is scheduled. These multitude of factors are leading to an increased interest in continuing work to provide students with deeply needed arts education programming in community held spaces.



A theme that arose through project prototypes and phases also focuses on intergenerational engagement across the project ideas. This reflects back to the proverb, “It takes a village to raise a child”. There is a deep interest within the BIPOC arts community to retain connection, culture and history at a time when curriculums within the school system are narrowing the lens of representation. The cohort believes there is an opportunity to rethink the safety net that the BIPOC community can provide for all children through secure, healthy environments with adults across generations to serve as role models.

The second theme surfaced across the project phases was a need for greater mental health support and a focus on whole person wellness for students, leaders and communities. This was identified by the cohort as a gap across geographic locations, various definitions of communities, and socio-economic groupings. This leads to unlimited possibilities of

collaboration between the arts education field and the burgeoning field of arts in medicine and others. Through community connection, the cohort believes there will also be increased resource sharing leading to stronger and more impactful partnerships and programming in the BIPOC arts education spaces.

Facilitator Learning

A learning that has been extrapolated by the facilitation team is a reflection on the burden on BIPOC cultural workers in the field of arts administration. The cohort expressed that there is limited time deliberately carved out for self-care within this community. The facilitators saw this as something that manifests from a lack of connection across the community outside of geographic proximity, lack of organizational staffing to support leaders in pursuing dream work, and the lack of mental health support in both structured as well as organically occurring contexts.

The facilitators believe that it is vital that mentorship opportunities be explored within the arts community to provide the sharing of information that goes beyond institutional knowledge and additionally to provide support networks for one another. In the long term, the facilitators believe more focus on this need will lead to greater retention within the field, room for the development of generational leadership growth, and a thriving BIPOC arts ecosystem that lives beyond scarcity.

Next Steps – A BANF Arts Education Pilot Project

The learnings from the Arts Education Landscape Exploration Project with the BANF Arts Education cohort will be considered as BANF embarks upon resourcing and implementing the launch of an arts education pilot project. The recommendations and considerations created by the Arts Education Exploration cohort will be reviewed by the BANF Arts Education Sub-Committee and BANF Leadership to determine a future resource initiative based on capacity and available funding. Additionally, BANF will review the recommendations and remaining questions that go beyond the realm of arts education and make determinations on how to share this information with the appropriate community stakeholders.