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THEATRE COMMUNICATIONS GROUP, INC.

CENTERPIECE

FOCUS ON: EDUCATION

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A LOOK AT WHERE WE ARE

BY DANIEL RENNER

In 1999, TCG sent out a survey to member theatres asking them to describe their education programs' budgets, mission statements and long-term goals. This *Centerpiece* is devoted to those findings, as well as to reactions from education directors in the various budget categories. Each of these directors was sent the individual responses as well as the tabulated findings. It is the first time that TCG has conducted an education survey to help us look at the many components that make up the field. Although by no means comprehensive, (think of it as a first 10 out of 12 tech rehearsal) it does provide an interesting snapshot of what's happening around the country.

One of the most intriguing statistics was how much theatres spend on education. The range varies from 7% to 25% of the total operating budget. Theatres with the largest budgets (group 1, with \$5 million or more) spent the smallest average percentage of their total budgets on education, while the theatres with the smallest budgets (group 5, with under \$500,000) spent the highest average percentage of their total budgets on education. Although the amount of money spent on education is not a reliable indicator of the commitment to education or the quality of the work being done by an institution, it does raise speculation about differences in emphasis and mission. What lies behind such extreme differences? It would be helpful if those of you reading this *Centerpiece* would respond to Laurie Baskin at TCG via email (lbaskin@tcg.org) or visit the Education/Outreach Bulletin Board on TCG's website (www.tcg.org) with your thoughts on the matter. It could provide for a lively discussion in the next Education *Centerpiece*.

But before that, take some time to look through the results of the survey and subsequent responses to make your own conclusions. The five contributing writers to this *Centerpiece* gathered together for a conference call (with members of the TCG staff and myself) before they sat down to write their responses. What ensued was a very lively discussion about the survey and where they thought education was headed in the next century. Although money often arose as a hot topic (usually the case when two or more theatre people are gathered together) there was a wonderful sense of camaraderie and humor. These are certainly two traits that should see us through whatever lies ahead.

Education *Centerpiece* curator: Daniel Renner, Director of Education, Denver Center Theatre Company
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EDUCATION SURVEY: OBSERVATIONS FROM THE FIELD

Andrea Allen
Director of Education
Seattle Repertory Theatre

When I began working for Seattle Repertory Theatre as a freelance teaching artist in 1993, we had only a few education programs. Far from discussing “long-term goals” for the department, we were too busy worrying about today’s class, today’s curriculum, and today’s unruly student. Since that time, we, like most of the theatres who responded to the survey, have developed ongoing educational programs which — depending on which city you hail from, and how organized the school districts are in that region — align more or less with the stated goals of the schools, teachers and (best of all) our theatres’ missions and goals. As I reviewed the surveys, I was interested and uplifted by the way we as a field are now visualizing and writing about our own futures.

More than half of those who responded to the “long-term goals” section of the survey (53 of the total 62 respondents) stated that expanding or strengthening current programs was of prime importance. Next on the list of stated priorities was creating or stabilizing partnerships in the community, including schools, universities, social services and other arts organizations. Third in popularity was the need to increase access to the theatre and its programs for underserved populations. These three elements are clearly inter-related, as most respondents had all three in some form. I believe this speaks to our common desire to forge meaningful partnerships in our communities, not because that activity is “politically correct” or “fundable,” but because we share the urge to expand and grow as artists, administrators, teachers and individuals. As we each work to define “education” and “community partnerships” in the context of the art we create and the world in which we live, taking time to confer on long-term goals with others in

the field is an essential means of expanding our reach. Besides, it can get really lonely if you think you’re the only crackpot committed to the Herculean hugeness of life-changing theatre and educational programs.

Nancy Schaeffer
Education Director
Dallas Children’s Theatre

Looking at the survey I was struck by the fact that more than half the theatres have created educational programming that ties directly to the curricular needs of public schools. I would not have predicted this level of activity ten years ago. Here in Dallas, I have watched many cultural institutions jump on the “educational bandwagon” for a variety of reasons that may well reflect this national trend in our field. As the arts were cut from school budgets, many of us felt we had no choice but to step in to fill that void. We all have had to look beyond student performances and become creative in the ways we develop new audiences. We have discovered that many teachers are eager to learn about using theatre as a teaching tool. We have also learned from the teachers how to challenge ourselves by working in social studies, language arts and reading classes. Certainly, the increased amount of funding for arts in education, as well as the fact that many state legislatures are calling for the re-introduction of arts standards, has helped spur this trend. That funding has helped us to train a whole new generation of artists who not only want to spend time in the schools working with young people, but also understand its importance. The question that looms ahead for all of us in the field is: What happens when the funding sources move on, as they always do, to other problems? Has the work we have been developing become integral to the missions of our theatres and our public schools? I look forward to the next

survey to see if we continue moving forward in this exciting direction.

Jack Young
Artistic & Executive Director
The Warehouse Theatre, Greenville,
SC

The statistics generated from the survey came up with some interesting demographics. I found it curious that, once all the companies’ numbers were put together, the demographics looked like that of the U.S. as a whole. My first thought was, “Well, of course, throw enough numbers together from a wide enough range and the average should be pretty average.” But the real surprise was finding that while the education demographics may mirror the U.S., our theatres’ regular audience demographics also reflected the U.S. as a whole. Our belief was that our educational efforts *do* reach more of the diverse audiences theatres desire in the future.

At The Warehouse Theatre, we’ve found some interesting challenges in our efforts to foster a more prominent place for theatre in the schools. As much as we’ve tried to make programming for students a “community partnership,” it continues to be a very one-sided relationship. The teachers and the principals, to whom we are answerable, are only interested in programming material that is a stage version of curriculum material. I try to take it as my mission to give the students a visceral experience that will re-energize their interest in what is provided in the classroom. Sometimes it seems that the students are actually deflated by the theatre experience, having already read the book, seen the video, and listened to the record. I wonder what kind of future audiences we’re building that are being told the theatre is a difficult art form that must be approached with a serious amount of preparation.

I’ve completely dropped attempting to provide anything that is not directly tied to curriculum. A wonderful

production of Greg Falls & Kurt Beattie's adaptation of *The Odyssey* was heartbreakingly under-attended because the middle school teachers didn't want the students encountering the material "too early" (Homer is reserved for the 9th grade).

I've also found a generation gap within the teachers. The older teachers are much more likely to ask why we don't come to the schools "like you used to." (I give them the same three answers: "Money, money and money") The teachers in their twenties and thirties seem to have no sense of this absence. I wonder if it is because they never had any experience with artists coming into their schools while they were students, and so have no expectation that this could be possible for the students now in their charge.

Nancy Shaw

Director of Education
The People's Light & Theatre
Company, Malvern, PA

One of the most important roles that the arts education program within a professional theatre can fill is as a *partner* in the creative process. Our work on stage and our education work with young people and adults both become more vital when we find ways for these strands to inform and inspire each other. When we bisect our programs too sharply, viewing education programs as largely instrumental, as simply a means of survival, we miss the resources, the stories, the new forms and models that they can provide.

An exciting aspect of the current survey is the evidence it gives of how many theatres are turning to arts education as a site for fostering new playwrights (both adults and young people) and developing new plays. Of the 62 theatres responding to the survey, 17 reported that they include (in various ways) new plays and new playwrights as part of their education programming. This work directly feeds the art at the same time as it transforms individuals. When an arts education program uncovers new stories and nurtures new

talent, it is an essential partner in keeping our art alive and growing.

Of the programs reported in the survey, those focusing on new plays and playwrights took many forms, ranging from programs for adults to programs for young people, from community collaborations and school residencies to playwriting workshops and seminars. Theatres which had bilingual programs (9 theatres), literacy programs (6 theatres) and programs for at-risk youth (8 theatres) were especially committed to inventing forms that uncovered new voices and original work. As Steppenwolf Theatre Company put it, their goal is "to serve as a resource for [their community] to find and/or tell their own stories."

Brian B. Crowe

Director of Education
New Jersey Shakespeare Festival

Is it more important to affect a greater number of students on a small scale or to affect fewer students in a truly profound manner? With limited funding and personnel, this is one of the greatest dilemmas facing the education wings of professional theatres today.

Over 77% of theatres responding to this survey note student matinee performances as a principal form of educational outreach. Financially speaking, student matinees enable theatres to reach a large number of students as part of their regular programming. Touring productions (offered by 36% of the theatres responding) bring performances to the school, but only provide a short-term connection and in turn offer a passive experience for the students. Providing an opportunity for young people to experience professional live theatre is a vital component in cultivating the audiences of tomorrow and fostering an appreciation for the arts at a young age. But how lasting is the effect of a simple three-hour field trip or a class-time performance? These "quick fixes" are attractive to school systems and theatres alike because of the limited time and resource commitments. Funders also

seem drawn to these programs, which tend to have higher visibility and larger audience bases.

More intensive programs, such as in-school residencies and classes for young people, have far-reaching influences on the students involved. However, the very nature of these programs limits the number of students reached and increases the need for additional funding and specialized personnel. These programs, due to their limited public exposure and smaller audience base, are often difficult to fund. Only 47% of the theatres responding noted a residency component of their education outreach efforts. Speaking from my experience with NJSF's "Shakespeare Experience" (an intensive six to eight week after-school program involving professional theatre artists, and culminating in a production of an abbreviated Shakespeare play performed, co-directed, co-designed and run by the students), the effect on the students actively involved in these programs is incredible and long lasting. The students not only gain a hands-on experience into the workings of live theatre, but they also gain many important life skills such as self worth, cooperation, creative problem-solving and self expression. Approaches and goals of residencies are quite diverse, yet students can be better served through these long-term collaborations with the school systems.

Certainly we all hope to have a deep and lasting impact on the students we reach, and it is encouraging to find that so many of the theatres responding to this survey offer a variety of programs to students and schools. In a time when more and more states are adding arts components to their core-curriculum standards, I believe we have the opportunity to affect the greatest number of students in a profound and lasting manner if funding and personnel can be made more readily available.