

# Report on Potential for Stronger Youth Connections to Arts, Culture and Heritage in Greater Des Moines

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Completed by: Community Youth Concepts  
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## Background.

In spring 2019, Bravo Greater Des Moines (Bravo) approached Community Youth Concepts (CYC) for help defining initial pathways that could advance the Youth Connections priority identified by the [Regional Cultural Assessment](#). For this project, CYC recommended youth focus groups to engage youth in a process aimed at understanding the nuances of how youth interact with arts, culture, and heritage in the Des Moines metro.

Short-term objectives were to learn how youth define arts, culture, and heritage; learn how to better connect youth to existing opportunities; and define those opportunities for enhanced programming that engage youth and their perspectives across all four Regional Cultural Priorities (Every Day, Everywhere Art; Strengthen the Creative Economy; Cultural Tapestry; and Youth Connections). The end goal was to identify pathways for Bravo and the community at-large to increase youth access to arts education and programs that meet them where they are physically, economically, developmentally, and culturally.

Community Youth Concepts (CYC) is a local non-profit, located in the Des Moines metro. Though this location, CYC engages close to 700 metro middle and high school youth annually in various volunteer service opportunities with youth voice being a central component of the service. CYC is seen as an expert in authentic youth engagement and leadership within the metro. Staff at CYC has significant years of experience challenging youth to consider their own priorities and infusing their perspectives into policies and practices set by institutions and planning entities. In every major project that CYC conducts, authentic youth voice is a vital component.

Throughout its tenure, CYC has often been asked to assist policy makers with the collection of youth perspectives through surveys, questionnaires, and focus groups. These discussions have been used to inform policy and strategic planning efforts of the organization, across the Des Moines metro, and statewide. CYC has designed youth engagement processes that have led to the creation of the ID Action Youth Action Council for youth with development disabilities, Mid Iowa Health Foundation supported uVoice Youth Philanthropy Board, Viva! East Bank youth strategies, youth feedback on the Youth Violence Initiative, and multiple CYC-specific initiatives. Prior to starting CYC, its co-founder helped lay the groundwork for multiple state-level youth engagement initiatives, including the State of Iowa Youth Action Council, Just Eliminate Lies, Iowa Youth Congress, and multiple city level youth advisory councils across Iowa.

## Methodology.

CYC utilized an open-ended, script-based format to encourage student dialogue and interaction across all focus groups. The script was created by CYC staff members with input from Bravo; it included purpose statements about the focus group, assurance of confidentiality, and open-ended questions based on the Regional Cultural Priorities. The purpose of the script was to create consistency among the groups, regardless of the main facilitator. CYC piloted these questions among students to inquire if they responded well in regard to understanding the language and terminology. The original script was revised based on the feedback, and was again piloted within two current CYC programs at two Des Moines metro high schools. Once finalized, the script remained consistent and is provided as an attachment to this document.

The initial marketing of the focus groups was done through established CYC groups, CYC partners, outreach to arts-related youth-serving groups, outreach through Bravo's Board of Directors and staff, youth-initiated marketing through a partnership with DMPS' Urban Leadership program, and general flyers posted at various youth-frequented locations. The groups with the greatest amount of dialogue occurred among peers who were comfortable with one another and/or were participants in an established group. Four focus groups were held during the school day during open periods (East, Roosevelt, Harding, Bondurant). The locations of each focus group were intentional to ensure that all youth populations within the Des Moines metro had the opportunity to participate.

Within this project, a total of 102 upper middle and high school students participated in 16 different groups (Forest Ave Library, Roosevelt High School, North High School, East High School, Harding Middle School, two at CYC, three at ArtsForce Iowa, Isiserettes, Des Moines Young Artists Theater, Urbandale coffee shop, Ankeny Library, Ankeny coffee shop, West Des Moines Library, Bondurant High School). In total, 20 groups were planned, with no one in attendance at Norwalk, Altoona, Hoover High School, and the Urbandale Public Library. Two of the suburban focus groups had only one attendee. Student participation ranged from 1 to 12 students per group. Ethnic composition of participants was diverse across the groups as a whole. Des Moines and Ankeny focus groups in particular had the highest rates of ethnic diversity among the individuals. The following demographic breakdown is noted on Table 1.

**Table 1: Demographics**

<u>Ethnicity/Race (N=86)</u>	N	%
African/African American	28	32.6
Caucasian	27	31.4
Asian/Pacific Islander	13	15.1
Latinx/Hispanic	10	11.6
Biracial/Multiracial	8	9.3

  

<u>School District (N=90)</u>	N	%
Des Moines Public Schools	63	70
Bondurant	13	14.4
Ankeny Community Schools	7	7.8
West Des Moines Community Schools	3	3.3
Waukee	2	2.2
Dowling Catholic	1	1.1
DMACC Urban Campus	1	1.1

  

<u>Gender (N=77)</u>	N	%
Female	54	70.1
Male	22	28.5
Queer (self-described language)	1	1.3

Each student that participated received credit for an hour of volunteer service or a \$5 gift card. While each group was expected to be one hour in length, there were four occasions in which the focus group extended to approximately 90 minutes with the permission of the group (Isiserettes, Des Moines Young Artists Theater, Roosevelt High School, Ankeny coffee shop).

During each focus group, two to three CYC staff/interns were present; each focus group had one CYC staff that facilitated group discussion while another staff member served as a recorder. In larger groups, a third staff member took notes on flip chart paper for the group. The demographics of students, including school district, ethnicity, and future interest in this project, were intentionally collected at the end of each focus group. Student demographics and the data collected were uploaded to excel spreadsheets within 24 hours of the focus group. After all focus groups were conducted, CYC staff members scrutinized the collected data to find commonalities. These themes were used develop the best recommendations that combine the needs of students with the scope of the project. CYC staff also consulted with a professor from Iowa State University to help unpack some of the cultural phenomena experienced during the focus groups.

## Key Findings

### ***Every Day, Everywhere Art***

Across all focus groups, youth primarily identified art as being present in downtown Des Moines; often mentioning the sculpture park, murals, the freestanding pianos placed downtown, and the Des Moines Art Center. Notably, students who live in suburbs with sculptures along trails and within parks did not mention the presence of art in their community. This indicates that downtown Des Moines is succeeding in having a strong art presence and identification within the community but that other, less-concentrated efforts are not having the same impact. Also, it is interesting to note that for nearly every focus group, visual art was the primary category that students identified as “art” in their community (i.e. murals, artwork, sculptures). Music, dance, theatre, and other forms of performance-art were not discussed in the majority of the focus groups, and in one group, a student asked, “Is dance a part of art?”

### ***Cultural Tapestry***

Throughout the focus groups, regardless of ethnic and cultural diversity, a disconnect between cultural representation and current opportunities was present. Non-white students overwhelmingly said that they do not feel represented in the art, cultural, and heritage opportunities currently available in central Iowa. In one poignant moment, a student from a primarily minority school commented that their school mural has predominantly white people depicted in it. It is important to note that while facilitators did not verify this statement, even if minority students are represented in the mural, students did not perceive themselves as being represented.

Exceptions to these feelings of non-representation included festivals that celebrate the cultural diversity of the Des Moines metro area. Several groups highlighted the World Food Festival as an event they really enjoy because of the opportunity to experience multiple cultures through food. However, most students noted these are often one-day or weekend events and are predominantly located in downtown Des Moines. Many students noted that because parents are often their transportation, ability to attend required the attendance of their parents. Further, children of immigrants stated that the comfort of their parents attending a large event where their language is not present was said to be daunting and limiting.

While festivals were brought up in several groups as a way that nonwhite student felt represented in Des Moines, some white students expressed fear to participate because they may inadvertently offend people. Some students were conscious that there are spaces intentionally created to make minority communities feel safe and at home, and expressed

anxiety about encroaching on spaces that they perceive are not designed for them. Others were fearful that they would not know culturally specific norms of behavior, or did not know if these groups and events were open to them. Thus, culture doesn't feel integrated throughout the community in a way that students of all backgrounds can share experiences in their everyday lives.

A key finding was noted not by the groups itself, but by the recruiting process. In general, despite strong connections with suburban youth and one-on-one recruitment, suburban youth were difficult to engage in this process; demographically, these students are more likely to be white and/or of Northern-European descent. When asked why they were not interested in participating, one youth stated, "I don't have any suggestions. I see my culture reflected everywhere." In the majority of focus groups, white students had a mentality that "this conversation [about culture and heritage] doesn't really apply to me." One student insisted she did not have culture because her family has been here since the 1600's; therefore her culture is "American culture." Due to those white students who struggled to articulate their culture, they also had a difficult time answering how they felt represented in current art-based opportunities available. Students answered that they did feel represented but could not offer specific examples.

Cost, transportation, and awareness were among the largest barriers that youth face when accessing opportunities that are currently available in the community. Youth stated art programming across the Des Moines metro is often too expensive to participate in. In a couple of groups, there was a sense of the "haves" and "have nots" with one student noting, "I can't afford a drawing class with actual artists. I have to rely on a free program here". They also stated that the free class was "fine, and I enjoy it here", but there was a sense of disenfranchisement. While some organizations offer scholarships based on financial need, it may not cover the entire cost of the program; if families have multiple children, then even a reduced fee can be unaffordable.

For families in which cost is not a barrier, transportation quickly becomes just as large of an issue. If programs do not happen at school or within walking distance, students often have trouble getting to and from programming. While the DART bus can be an option, the timeframes frequently do not meet the needs of students. Students who rely on the bus may have to arrive late, leave early, or cannot get to the destination at all. Also to note, public transportation is not the most appealing for some students – with at least one focus group participant simply stating, "I don't like taking the bus."

The final barrier that was raised in each group relating to accessing art-based opportunities was awareness. Students do not know about the opportunities that are available to them. This is especially true for opportunities that are not directly tied to and/or marketed through their school.

### ***Strengthen the Creative Economy.***

Student perception of a career in the arts was mixed. When asked what is exciting about pursuing a career in arts, many students connected an art career to following your passion and “doing something that you love.” Students often mentioned that a career in arts allows one to travel, meet new people, and constantly work on something new.

While students could clearly articulate the value of an art-based career, almost all of them expressed concern about the viability of that career path. One student commented, “It feels like we have to get all of our art out in high school. You only have four years to participate in art and then you are done.” Obtaining an income or “making a living” was the top concern that students had about pursuing a career in the arts. Outside of becoming an art teacher, many students commented that it is too difficult to sustain oneself on an art salary. Youth stated that art could be a good part-time job or “side hustle,” but were often skeptical that one could have a stable income.

The other primary concern about pursuing a career in arts was the fear of rejection. Students mentioned the insecurity that comes with constantly comparing oneself to other artists and the self-doubt that comes with questioning the success of others. Several youth commented that their families would not approve of an arts-related career; they are pushed towards career fields such as technology.

### ***Youth Connections.***

Perhaps the most prominent theme throughout all groups was that students are looking for spaces where they feel safe, welcomed, and accepted. The issue of emotional safety came up in multiple instances. The articulated message was the following: if students do not feel welcome, they will not attend, even if the opportunity is free.

Developmentally, teenagers are in a stage of life where they are focused on themselves and have a desire to fit into a peer group. Often fear prevents students from participating in activities outside of their comfort zone. This fear includes not knowing what to expect, not understanding group norms, not being understood/ heard, and not knowing anyone else in the group. These fears are amplified if a student is minoritized in any way (i.e. race, sexual

orientation, disability, religion, non-native English speaker, etc.) For example, one student said many activities, “don’t say ‘it’s for white people,’ but you know what it is.” In that same focus group, another student spoke at length that he felt like he was losing his heritage and traditions in order to assimilate to American culture.

## Recommendations

Based on the key findings of the focus groups, CYC staff has outlined several recommendations. Perhaps the single most important action step we can take is to **ensure that youth are authentically involved in the marketing, planning, and implementation of art education and programs.** Through this action step, we can ensure all young people in the region have access to a rich array of creative and culture experiences: formal, informal, educational and recreational. This could take the form of a Youth Advisory Council that makes recommendations and is an integrated part of Bravo Greater Des Moines. A model that has been effective in Seattle is called “The New Guard: Teen Arts Leadership Society” which mimics the CYC uVoice Youth Philanthropy Board. The structure of responsibilities “includes all types of arts leadership skill-building including fundraising, planning teen-centric art events, discussing art equity and social justice, and building a community of arts-stoked teens through regular group arts outings.” This particular group provides stipends or service learning hours for its youth members and is also tied into a larger free TeenTix pass marketing generator that highlights partner activities that youth can use a free pass to attend.

Art and creative experiences need to be personal, local, and connect people to their history. **Many participants stated they wanted more opportunities for youth to be engaged in the creation of the art around the metro.** This personal engagement would lead to art being more reflective of the diversity in the Des Moines metro area. Diverse opportunities need to be more than just annual festivals, but rather infused throughout the community. This process could be a strategic focus for a Youth Advisory Council and can be implemented in funding decisions; youth engaged in art opportunities; and youth advisory capacity to various arts, cultural, and heritage-based activities.

Integration of art, culture, and heritage will be most successful in spaces where youth feel safe and welcomed. **While it is important to work on the underlying factors that create a sense of inclusiveness, a more immediate approach is to integrate opportunities into current spaces where youth already feel accepted.** Identifying such spaces with youth and then incorporating mission-aligned programming through funding and partnerships would make art, culture, and heritage opportunities more accessible for youth. Through natural partnerships, Bravo could



begin to address the “haves” and “have nots” undertones present throughout the series focus groups. The TeenTix concept may also be another method, however, **unless youth feel emotionally supported, free tickets or scholarships were not mentioned by students as helpful means of support in youth integration of community art opportunities.**

If students have a safe and welcoming place to go, other barriers such as transportation can be addressed. **One way to address the transportation barrier could be to participate with other entities with similar goals of making resources more accessible for central Iowa residents.** Community collaboration provides an opportunity to bring a diverse group of stakeholders together can provide a holistic approach to integrating art, culture, and heritage into our community.

Finally, **in order for a career in art to be viewed as a viable career option, students need to be taught skills that will help them be successful when they enter the career field.** A two-pronged approach of mentorship opportunities as well as pairing arts education with business or personal finance would help students who wish to pursue an art-based career. Because many artists are entrepreneurs, it is important to pair arts education with personal finance or business education to give students the confidence that they can make a living and support themselves as artists. Mentorship or paid apprenticeships give students an opportunity to make connections with current artists in their community, as well as learn what it is actually like to be a professional artist. Mentorships and apprenticeships have long been used in other career fields; the lessons learned in these positions are transferrable to a career in the arts.

## Conclusion

These focus groups provided an opportunity to intimately consider the experiences and gaps that affect how youth in our community intersect with the intercultural fabric that weaves our communities together. This report is written to help Bravo and the community at-large stitch the tattered elements and create a future that welcomes everyone to push the priorities of the Regional Cultural Assessment forward.