

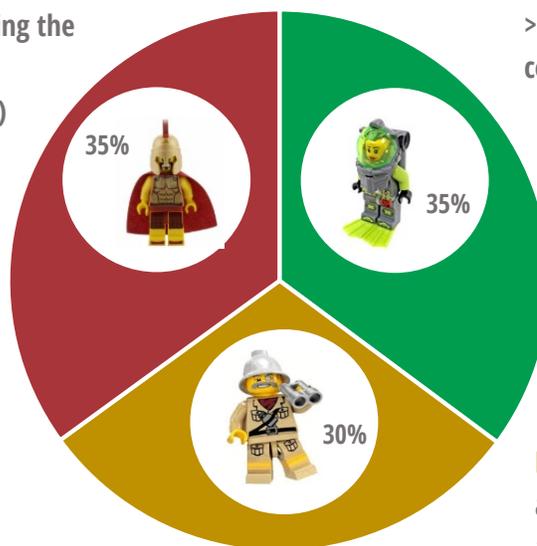


Approaches to Arts Learning in High School

Traditionally, researchers and policy makers have gauged students' participation in the arts by counting course credits earned and categorizing them from low to high. While this method provides a clear accounting of the extent of participation, it fails to describe the more complex patterns of participation that consistently occur. In this report, we grouped students into three distinct and equally distributed categories, based on how they approached arts learning during high school, which we named *spartans*, *explorers*, and *deep divers* (Figure 1). *Spartans* only study the minimum requirement in arts, *explorers* study more than required but never take an advanced-level arts course, and *deep divers* take at least one advanced-level course. To be clear, the students' personal preferences are just one factor influencing their approach to arts learning. Parents, counselors, remedial course requirements, double blocking, and other scheduling conflicts can also influence course enrollment. The approach to arts learning represents not just the students but also the opportunities and barriers they encountered in Austin Independent School District (AISD). Our hope is that understanding the three approaches to arts learning will inform how AISD strategizes for more equitable access to the arts during high school.¹

Figure 1.
Approximately one-third of students belong in each approach to arts learning.

Spartans earned 1 arts credit (meeting the graduation requirement)



Deep divers took > 1 advanced arts course

Explorers earned > 1 arts credit but took no advanced arts courses

Source. Course enrollment records

¹ This report is a brief. Everything reported here is statistically significant. The methodology and statistical support can be found in the full report: <http://tinyurl.com/CLlreports>.

The Spartans

The term *spartan*² describes the students who only did what was required in the arts to get a high school diploma. About one-third of students classified as spartans. In general, spartans had few defining student characteristics beyond their arts participation. They were a diverse, wide representation of almost all students. They differed from non-spartans in only two additional ways: (a) they took fewer arts classes in 8th grade than non-spartans took and (b) they were slightly less likely to be female.³



Once in high school, 50% of spartans earned their required credit in visual arts. Specifically, 49% of spartans earned their credit in a course called Art I. Beyond visual arts study, 31% of spartans earned their required credit in theater, 13% earned it in music, and 6% earned it in dance. Spartans differed in how they spent their time outside of school. Unlike explorers and deep divers, spartans were 32% more likely to do community service during high school and 38% more likely to have jobs outside of school. Academically, their long-term outcomes were not distinctive in any way.

There is much we do not know about the spartans. What subject areas and careers interested them? Which elective credits did they take instead of the arts? How many of them were artistic outside of school? We are curious to know how spartans felt about the one arts class they did take in school. Why did so many of them take Art 1 as their one required course, how did having so many spartans in Art 1 influence that course's method of instruction or content, and did that have an impact on the experience of other students? In addition, while we know that approximately one-third of students were spartans at the district level, that proportion ranged from 12% to 51% at the school level. We would like to understand what school factors contributed to such large differences in the proportion of spartans at a school.

² The spartans get their namesake from ancient Sparta, which eschewed luxury and comfort as a culture. However, today we use the adjective *spartan* to describe someone who takes a minimalist, no-frills approach.

³ In the realm of arts learning, females usually take more courses, and males take fewer. While the status of female comes with systemic disadvantages in most arenas of life, in the arts, we tend to consider male students as the marginalized target population.

Spartans, by the numbers

These results compare spartans with non-spartans

↑ More likely ↓ Less likely
= Equally likely
more arrows = stronger relationship

Student Characteristics

- ↓↓↓ Female
- = Hispanic
- = Black
- = White
- = English learner
- = Special education
- = Economically disadvantaged
- = First generation to college
- = High GPA in 8th
- ↓↓↓ Arts participation in 8th

All outcomes below control for predictive value of student characteristics above

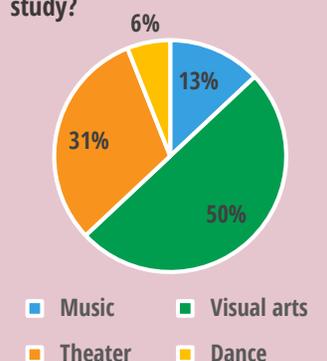
Outcomes During HS

- = HS Attendance
- = HS GPA
- ↑ Community Service
- ↑ Job Outside School

Outcomes After HS

- = College ready in ELA
- = College ready in math
- = College ready in both
- = Enrolled in college
- = Persisted in college

Which art forms did spartans study?



Explorers, by the numbers

These results compare
explorers with non-explorers,
unless otherwise specified

↑ More likely ↓ Less likely
= Equally likely

more arrows = stronger relationship

Student Characteristics

↑	Female
↑	Hispanic
↑↑	Black
↓↓↓	White
↑↑	English learner
↑↑	Special education
↑↑	Economically disadvantaged
↑↑	First generation to college
↓↓↓	High GPA in 8 th
↑↑	Arts participation in 8 th
↑↑	Compared with spartans
↓↓↓	Compared with deep divers

All outcomes controlled for
predictive value of student
characteristics above

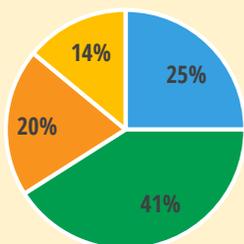
Outcomes During HS

=	HS attendance
↓	HS GPA
↓	Community service
=	Job outside school

Outcomes after HS

=	College ready in ELA
↓	College ready in math
↓	College ready in both
↓	Enrolled in college
↓	Persisted in college

Which art forms did
explorers study?



■	Music	■	Visual arts
■	Theater	■	Dance

The Explorers

The term *explorer* describes the students who took more arts courses than required for a high school diploma but who never took an advanced-level course. Some explorers may have been explorers in the truest sense of the word—genuinely curious to experience a diversity of art forms. Some might have preferred to study arts at an advanced level but encountered a barrier along the way. Some explorers might not have genuinely wanted to study the arts but chose the low-level courses to fill elective credits; some might have been placed in arts classes by counselors after not getting their first elective choices. Despite these hypothesized differences in cause, our current analysis did reveal they had a distinct profile as a group.



Before high school, explorers took an average amount of arts classes (more than spartans and fewer than deep divers). Unlike the other groups, explorers earned their high school arts credits somewhat evenly across the art forms. Beyond this, our analysis uncovered surprising and worrisome findings about the explorers. We found that explorers were overrepresented by students who qualified for special education services or free/reduced priced lunch, who spoke English as a second language, or were the first generation in their family who might attend college. They were also very likely to be students of color. Unfortunately, these characteristics are all associated with external systemic injustices in today's society and are still predictive of poor academic outcomes, so it was not surprising that explorers also got lower average grades before high school than did the other groups.

With respect to explorers' long-term outcomes during and after high school, we found they were likely to have lower grade point averages (GPAs), less likely to be college ready in both math and English language arts (ELA), less likely to enroll in college, and less likely to persist in college when they did enroll than were non-explorers. We found consistent outcomes even for the explorers who stayed at one school for all of high school, ruling out mobility as the driving factor in these results. These long-term outcomes for explorers are remarkable because they controlled for the predictive influence of all 10 student characteristics listed in the top of the side bar. These robust analyses suggest that the negative relationship between being an explorer and long-term negative outcomes were likely linked to the educational opportunities available and denied to these students, and not to the students' characteristics themselves.

The analysis of explorers raises many questions: First, we need to better understand what student and school factors lead to explorer status. How much agency did explorers have over their course enrollments? Why did exploring predict these negative outcomes, or does something else predict both exploring and the negative outcomes? What other factors were in play here? It is also noteworthy that the proportion of explorers varied widely between high schools. Some schools had 52% explorers, and others had only 8% explorers. We want to understand why schools had such different proportions of explorers, and how schools might change their policies or arts programming in response to these new findings.

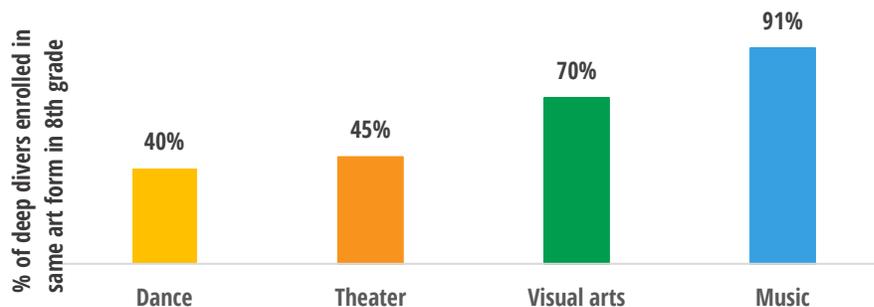
The Deep divers

The term *deep diver* describes students who took at least one advanced level arts course during high school. We found that deep divers were overrepresented by characteristics we often associate with external systemic privilege. Compared with the other groups, they were more likely to be non-economically disadvantaged, be White, be native English speakers, have parents who went to college, and not qualify for special education services. Before entering high school, deep divers also tended to get better grades, and not surprisingly, took many more arts classes than non-deep divers. When we look at the postsecondary outcomes of deep divers, the results were very positive. Even when controlling for student demographics and prior academic performance, deep divers were more likely to have higher GPAs, be college ready in math and ELA, enroll in college, and persist once enrolled in college.



As we tried to identify the distinguishing profile of the deep diver arts education, we were particularly curious about the art forms they studied and their interest in art before 9th grade. Deep divers earn the majority of their credits (56%) in music. While some forms of music study can be started in high school, most instrumental ensembles require prior study. We found that at least 89% of deep divers began their studies before entering high school, but those numbers varied widely between art forms, with music being the highest (Figure 2).

Figure 2.
Many deep divers were already enrolled in the same art form in 8th grade.



Source. AISD student enrollment records 2012–2017

We are curious how early most deep divers actually begin their studies, how that differs by art form, and how we might foster higher rates of deep diving outside of music. Because deep divers presented a wide range of proportions at different high schools (21% to 57%), we also want to understand what a school can do to foster, or inhibit, deep diving in the arts.

Deep divers, by the numbers

These results compare deep divers with non-deep divers

↑ More likely ↓ Less likely
= Equally likely
more arrows = stronger relationship

Student Characteristics

- ↑↑ Female
- ↓ Hispanic
- ↓↓↓ Black
- ↑ White
- ↓↓↓ English learner
- ↓↓↓ Special education
- ↓↓ Economically disadvantaged
- ↓↓ First generation to college
- ↑↑ High GPA in 8th
- ↑↑↑ Arts participation in 8th

All outcomes below control for predictive value of student characteristics above

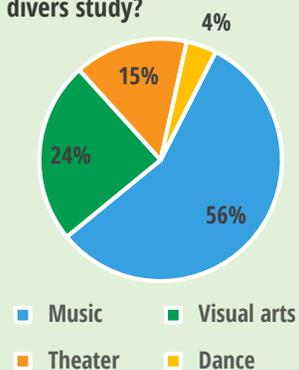
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Outcomes After HS

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- ↑↑ College ready in math
- ↑↑ College ready in both
- ↑ Enrolled in college
- ↑↑ Persisted in college

Which art forms did deep divers study?



Conclusion

While all arts learning is theoretically equally available to all students at AISD high schools, this study found that, in reality, three distinct approaches to arts learning were consistently associated with different student characteristics and different outcomes after graduation. Interestingly, the analysis of the spartans did not raise much concern from an access perspective. We suspect these students were interested in other areas of study and/or work and appreciated the near neutrality of their demographic profile. However, the explorers and deep divers were a stark example of systemic injustice, with explorers bearing most of the disadvantages and deep divers reaping most of the benefits. It is disheartening that the gaps between these two groups were so large, despite only differing in their arts participation by whether or not they reached one advanced course. In this short report, we focused on AISD's graduating class of 2017 ($n = 3,219$), but the longer version of this report established the sturdiness of the demographic trends over every graduating class from 2017 to 2020 ($n = 13,646$). To what extent these groupings are generalizable to the larger public is still unknown, but they were persistent in AISD, were detrimental to our most vulnerable students, and deserve our immediate attention.

Unfortunately, as is often the case in solely quantitative research, what this report unveils leads to additional questions to explore. We want to unravel *how* and *why* these approaches to arts learning were so persistent. What influenced a student's choice in approach? Is there a student characteristic we missed that is pivotal in a student's arts learning path (e.g., grit, resilience, parent involvement in the arts)? What if students did not benefit from electives they were forced into taking? Do these results reflect differing amounts of arts taking or differing amounts of agency over course selection? Alternatively, maybe some school-level or teacher-level characteristics are pivotal in these learning paths. Do "better" arts teachers tend to attract more explorers than spartans or more deep divers than explorers? Does participation differ when teachers are the same race/gender as their students? Do students persist or desist in arts study, based on the programming or their aesthetic match with their teachers? Most importantly: *What about our current system is fostering or inhibiting these participation trends in approaches to arts learning, and how can we learn from these students?*

Do you have an insight into the approaches to arts learning or have a related research question you would like to suggest to our research team? Tell us about it here:

<https://tinyurl.com/ApproachesToArtsLearning>

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September 2020

Publication 19.49RB