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A THREE-PHASE EVIDENCE-BUILDING PARTNERSHIP

Building the Evidence Base for Music Education

Music Impact Coalition × NORC at the University of Chicago

Since 2024, The Tullman Family Office has funded a three-phase partnership with NORC at the University of Chicago to examine how K–12 music and arts education relates to academic achievement, social-emotional development, durable skills, and long-term workforce and economic outcomes. The work began as a Let Music Fill My World (LMFMW) evidence-building initiative; The Music Impact Coalition (MIC) now helps shape the research and is the principal champion advancing this work.

What the research has found

The findings are encouraging and intentionally nuanced. The strongest conclusion is not that the evidence is complete—it is that educators, advocates, funders, policymakers, and other interested parties need better, more current data to tell a more compelling story about the power, relevance, and importance of creative learning opportunities, including music and arts education, for young people.

Phase I: Existing Evidence and Data Landscape

- Music education is positively associated across the literature with general cognition and IQ.
- Some studies identify benefits for emotional expression, regulation, empathy, self-esteem, and prosocial behavior.
- Effects on math, literacy, executive functioning, and broader skill transfer are mixed and often weaken in more rigorous studies.
- NORC found no published studies directly examining the relationship between K–12 music education and adult workforce or economic outcomes — establishing the central evidence gap for the next phases.

Phase II: Original Analysis of National Datasets

SPPA. After accounting for relevant background characteristics, in-school music education was positively associated with educational attainment, weekly earnings, recent employment, and professional or managerial occupations. Educational attainment appears to mediate much of this relationship.

LSAY. NORC did not find consistent, statistically significant differences in adult employment or financial stability after controls, although the analysis identified some shorter-term academic and selected leadership-related associations.

Bottom line. The existing datasets point to promising relationships, **but also make clear the need for more dynamic, up-to-date research.**

Theory of change

Phase II translated the literature and data findings into a draft theory of change: equitable access to high-quality, student-centered music education can support engagement, academic and social-emotional development, and durable skills that may contribute to longer-term education, workforce, and well-being outcomes.

INTERPRETATION MATTERS

Results from Phases I and II show associations, not proof that music education caused the observed outcomes. Selection effects, unequal access, historical data, retrospective reporting, and inconsistent measures remain important limitations.

Phase III: New national evidence

Phase III moves beyond the limits of existing datasets by creating new, purpose-built data through NORC's probability-based AmeriSpeak Panel. The instrument is designed for approximately 1,000 U.S. adults, with a median survey length of roughly eight minutes and a two-to-three-week online field period.

The survey examines

- Adults' K–12 music and arts participation, including whether opportunities were available in or outside school.
- Perceived connections between music and arts education and career success, creativity, adaptability, resilience, collaboration, and interpersonal skills.
- Public perceptions of local school access, program quality, and funding.
- Parents' reports of children's participation, frequency, program costs, instructional time, and external partnerships.
- Employment, income, financial stability, social mobility, workplace creativity, and self-reported durable skills.

Current status. As of September 2026, the survey was underway with an anticipation completion timeframe of October 2026. The funded scope calls for a formal report integrating all three phases, with detailed results, subgroup patterns, trends, and data visualizations.

How this work supports MIC

- **A shared evidence base** gives coalition partners a common, credible foundation for communications and advocacy.
- **A stronger public narrative** connects creative learning to the durable skills young people need to thrive in work, community, and well-being.
- **Better policy questions** document public perceptions of access, quality, funding, instructional time, and family costs.
- **A research roadmap** clarifies what can be learned from national survey data and where longitudinal or causal evaluation is still needed.

NORC's role within MIC

NORC participates in MIC as a research and evaluation partner and has advised on potential North Carolina evaluation approaches. The funded research agreement remains an LMFMW scope that directly serves MIC. No separate paid NORC scope for evaluation of MIC's North Carolina implementation was identified in the reviewed correspondence; Duke's evaluation is a distinct funded project.

THE OPPORTUNITY

Together, MIC and NORC are building a more rigorous case for treating music and arts education as essential infrastructure for youth thriving — while remaining clear about what the evidence can and cannot yet prove.