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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

February 22, 2019

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High-Quality Arts Program Benefits Local ‘Tweens’ And Local Boys & Girls Clubs, New Study Finds

*Afterschool arts found to ‘spark’ youth interest, boost retention;
Boys & Girls Clubs of Central Florida launches program*

Orlando, FL – Tweens are notoriously tough to attract and retain in youth-serving programs, but organizations that created and managed high-quality afterschool arts programs were able to do just that, sparking young people’s interest in the arts, according to a new study from Research for Action and McClanahan Associates.

Many young people who live in high-poverty communities grow up without exposure to the arts, and even fewer receive artistic training, despite clear evidence of the advantages of arts education for youth. In response, Boys & Girls Clubs of America, with funding from The Wallace Foundation, developed and implemented the Youth Arts Initiative, which offers high-quality arts skill-development classes to tweens at pilot Boys & Girls Clubs. Boys & Girls Clubs of Central Florida will be one of five Boys & Girls Clubs organizations nationally to run the program in the next wave of the initiative.

The new study, *Designing for Engagement: The Experiences of Tweens in the Boys & Girls Clubs’ Youth Arts Initiative*, is the second of four planned reports on the Youth Arts Initiative. The Wallace-commissioned study examined whether afterschool arts programs using 10 success principles could, in fact, attract young participants and provide benefits.

“Families, Club staff, and tweens themselves said that participants honed more than just their new artistic skills—they developed social and emotional learning competencies related to self-awareness, self-management and relationship skills,” said Wendy McClanahan, an author of the report.

“This research found that while tweens are a difficult population for out-of-school-time programs to attract, high-quality arts programs did engage them, and more than half participated regularly,” added Research for Action’s Tracey Hartmann, the report’s other lead author.

The participating Boys & Girls Clubs created arts programs—in subjects such as digital, performing, and visual arts—taught by “teaching artists” in high-quality professional spaces. Together, the three pilot Boys & Girls Clubs served a total of 1,280 “tweens,” or young people between the ages of 10 and 14, during the years studied. The first phase of the initiative, aimed at young people from low-income households, began in 2014 as the three Clubs applied a set of 10 [Principles for Success](#) for afterschool

arts programs, which were described in a 2013 Wallace-commissioned study that surveyed small, arts-focused organizations.

The 10 “Success Principles”—such as the establishment of high expectations, employment of professional teaching artists and the creation of well-equipped spaces—didn’t just help teach artistic skills, the report suggests. They also instilled a passion for the arts, or “spark,” that kept tweens interested long enough to learn and appreciate these skills. These sparks kept young people engaged; most students enrolled in intensive skill-development classes returned the following year.

Further, both students and the Boys & Girls Clubs benefitted. In interviews and surveys, families reported that students had greater discipline, drive, confidence, and social competence than they did before they enrolled in the new programs. At the same time, Clubs reported that the students participating in arts programs were more likely to partake in other Club activities and at a greater rate than other Club members.

“At Boys & Girls Clubs of Central Florida, we’re about closing the opportunity gap that faces children from low-income families,” said Gary Cain, President & CEO of Boys & Girls Clubs of Central Florida. “Until now, most of the families we serve could only dream about providing their children with the kind of hands-on, high-quality art instruction that this grant from the Wallace Foundation will fund. This is the kind of experience that really has the potential to change a child’s life.”

The report details the successes of Boys & Girls Clubs of America’s efforts, the challenges clubhouses faced, and recommendations for other youth-serving organizations contemplating similar programs. Among its recommendations, which Boys & Girls Clubs of Central Florida will apply:

Make the arts visible and valued. Dedicated spaces, near-professional equipment, well-trained teaching artists, and high-profile events demonstrate Clubs’ commitment and help draw young people to arts programs.

Set high expectations, and help tweens reach them. The demands of the new programs, such as their strict attendance requirements, did not deter enrollees, as Clubs feared. In fact, coupled with adult encouragement, strong youth development practices and some flexibility when necessary, these demands proved to be powerful motivators for most tweens.

Families are important, too. Teaching artists had to maintain regular communications with parents and caretakers to ensure tweens had the time and support they needed to develop their skills and interest in the arts.

But challenges remain. Clubs still have hurdles to overcome. Chief among them are complications that arise in sustaining the programs and replacing the sizable influx of Wallace support necessary to set up the new programs, support that created some tension with other programs that operate with far fewer resources.

“This important new report confirms that these programs helped young people develop a passion for the arts and kept them engaged,” said Edward Pauly, director of research at The Wallace Foundation. “These findings build on what we learned from the prior study: that success principles gleaned from small, high-quality, arts-focused programs can help draw and retain young people at large youth-serving organizations like Boys & Girls Clubs.”

Initially, the program will be offered at four local Clubs—the Walt Disney World Clubhouse in Pine Hills, the Levy-Hughes Branch in Parramore, the Universal Orlando Foundation Branch in Carver Shores, and the East Altamonte Branch. Club members will receive approximately five hours of weekly instruction in the areas of painting and drawing, graphic design, and digital arts—photography and filmmaking. The program will benefit about 80 local teens, with the intent of expanding next year.

The first study of the Youth Arts Initiative, [*Raising the Barre + Stretching the Canvas: Implementing High Quality Arts Programming in a National Youth Serving Organization*](#), explored how the local Clubs, with assistance from the Boys & Girls Clubs of America national headquarters, used principles from The Wallace Foundation's study [*Something to Say: Success Principles for Afterschool Arts Programs from Urban Youth and Other Experts*](#) to transform their existing arts-and-crafts programs into opportunities for the tweens to develop their own artistic skills.

Further research on the Youth Arts Initiative will explore ways to retain the quality and benefits found by the study, while lowering the costs per child served by the afterschool programs.

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About The Wallace Foundation

The Wallace Foundation seeks to improve education and enrichment for disadvantaged children and foster the vitality of arts for everyone. The foundation has an unusual approach: funding efforts to test innovative ideas for solving important public problems, conducting research to find out what works and what doesn't and to fill key knowledge gaps – and then communicating the results to help others. Wallace, which works nationally, has five major initiatives under way:

- *School leadership: Strengthening education leadership to improve student achievement.*
- *Afterschool: Helping cities make good afterschool time programs available to many more children.*
- *Building audiences for the arts: Enabling arts organizations to bring the arts to a broader and more diverse group of people.*
- *Arts education: Expanding arts learning opportunities for children and teens.*
- *Social and emotional learning: Aligning and improving opportunities for social and emotional learning for children across school and out-of-school-time settings. Summer and expanded learning: Improving summer learning opportunities for disadvantaged children, and enriching and expanding the school day.*

Find out more at www.wallacefoundation.org.

About Boys & Girls Clubs of Central Florida:

Since 1944, Boys & Girls Clubs of Central Florida has provided at-risk children from the local community, between the ages of 6 and 18, with a safe place to learn and grow. Our membership totals more than 15,000 young people at 35 Clubs and middle school sites in 7 counties. The mission of Boys & Girls Clubs of Central Florida is to inspire and enable all young people, especially those from disadvantaged circumstances, to realize their full potential as productive, responsible and caring citizens. Learn more at 407.841.6855, www.bgccf.org or [facebook.com/bgccf](https://www.facebook.com/bgccf).

About Research for Action

Research for Action (RFA) is a Philadelphia-based nonprofit education research organization. RFA seeks to use research as the basis for the improvement of educational opportunities and outcomes for traditionally underserved students. Our work is designed to strengthen public schools and postsecondary institutions; provide research-based recommendations to policymakers, practitioners and the public at the local, state and national levels; and enrich the civic and community dialogue about public education. Learn more at www.researchforaction.org.

About McClanahan Associates, Inc.

McClanahan Associates, Inc. (MAI) is a woman-owned firm committed to strengthening programs based on flexible, yet rigorous, evaluation practices that help nonprofits and philanthropic organizations achieve their goal of improving people's lives. Learn more at <http://www.maieval.com/>