



NATIONAL  
ENDOWMENT  
FOR THE ARTS

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A great nation  
deserves great art.

Statement of

**Dana Gioia**

Chairman

National Endowment for the Arts

before the

Committee on Education and Labor  
Subcommittee on Healthy Families and Communities

U.S. House of Representatives

May 8, 2008

**Prepared Statement of  
Dana Gioia, Chairman**

**National Endowment for the Arts**

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Subcommittee on Healthy Families and Communities**

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Madame Chairwoman and Distinguished Members of the Subcommittee:

I am honored to appear before the committee to report on the current state of the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) and provide you with information on our programs and national initiatives.

Over the last six years, the National Endowment for the Arts has demonstrated what the agency can accomplish with a compelling vision and exemplary performance. There is a new consensus in Washington and across the nation that the National Endowment for the Arts makes a singular contribution to the lives of all Americans. We do this by fostering artistic excellence and bringing the best of the arts and arts education to *all* Americans. I am proud to say that the agency is now operating with high artistic standards, inclusive partnerships, improved efficiency, and unprecedented democratic reach.

**I. BACKGROUND**

***The Current State of the Arts in America***

The arts are a reflection of America's identity and civilization – dynamic, diverse and original. America's artistic achievements encompass traditional fields like literature, concert music, painting, theater, and design, and pioneering efforts in newer forms such as jazz, blues, film, modern dance and musical theater. Over the past century, no other nation has surpassed the United States in its creative achievements – from the high arts to folk and popular arts. And it is not an accident that there is a deep connection between creative genius in the arts and our nation's success in science, business and technology.

In other ways, however, we are experiencing an impoverishment of American culture. Fifty years ago, along with Mickey Mantle, Willie Mays, and Sandy Koufax, most Americans could have named, at the least, Robert Frost, Carl Sandburg, Arthur Miller, Thornton Wilder, Georgia O'Keeffe, Leonard Bernstein, Leontyne Price, and Frank Lloyd Wright. Not to mention scientists and thinkers like Linus Pauling, Jonas Salk, Rachel Carson, and Margaret Mead.

Americans were not smarter then, but American culture was. Even the mass media placed a greater emphasis on presenting a broad range of human achievement. Televised variety programs like the *Ed Sullivan Show*, featured classical musicians like Jascha Heifetz and Arthur Rubinstein, opera singers like Robert Merrill and Anna Moffo and jazz greats like Duke Ellington and Louis Armstrong. The same was true of literature. Robert Frost, John Steinbeck, Lillian Hellman and James Baldwin were featured on general-interest television shows. All of these people were famous to the average American – because the culture considered them important. Today, no citizen would encounter that range of arts and ideas in the popular culture. Almost everything in our national culture, even the news, has been reduced to entertainment, or altogether eliminated.

This loss of recognition for artists and thinkers has impoverished our culture in innumerable ways. Our children are not presented with role models who lead a successful and meaningful life who are not denominated by money or fame. Adult life begins in a child's imagination and we have relinquished that imagination to the marketplace.

The role of culture must go beyond economics. Culture should help us know what is beyond price and what does not belong in the marketplace – providing some cogent view of the good life beyond mass accumulation. In this respect, our culture is failing us.

### ***Arts Education***

There is only one social force in America potentially large and strong enough to counterbalance this commercialization of cultural values – our educational system. At one time the majority of public high schools in this country provided a music program with choir and band, sometimes a jazz band, or even an orchestra. High schools offered a drama program, sometimes with dance instruction. And there were writing opportunities in the school paper and literary magazines, as well as studio art training.

We are sorry to note that these programs are no longer widely available. This once visionary and democratic system has been almost entirely dismantled by well-meaning but myopic school boards, county commissioners and state officials. Art has become an expendable luxury, and 50 million students have paid the price. Today a child's access to arts education is largely a function of his or her parents' income.

The purpose of arts education is not to produce artists, though may be a byproduct. The real purpose of arts education is to create complete human beings capable of leading successful and productive lives in a free society.

This is not happening now in American schools. The situation is a cultural and educational disaster with huge and alarming economic consequences. If the U.S. is to compete effectively in the new global marketplace, it is not going to succeed through cheap labor or cheap raw materials, nor even the free flow of capital or a streamlined industrial base. To compete successfully, this country needs creativity, ingenuity and innovation.

## *Civic Engagement*

Marcus Aurelius believed that the course of wisdom consisted of learning to trade easy pleasures for more complex and challenging ones. Our culture is trading off the challenging pleasures of art for the easy comforts of entertainment. And that is exactly what is happening – not just in the media, but in our schools and in civic life.

Entertainment promises us a predictable pleasure – humor, thrills, emotional titillation or even the odd delight of being vicariously terrified. It exploits and manipulates who we are rather than challenging us with a vision of who we might become.

Recent studies conducted by the National Endowment for the Arts, in partnership with the U.S. Census, have found that our country is dividing into two distinct behavioral groups. One group spends most of its free time sitting at home as passive consumers of electronic entertainment. The other group also uses and enjoys the new technology, but these individuals balance it with a broader range of activities. They go out – to exercise, play sports, volunteer and do charity work at about three times the level of the first group. What is the defining difference between passive and active citizens? It is not income, geography or even education. It is whether or not they read for pleasure and participate in the arts. These cultural activities seem to awaken a heightened sense of individual awareness and social responsibility.

Today, there is a growing consensus across the country that something must be done to fill the vacuum created in many lives with the dominance of the commercial mass media and entertainment, and the loss of arts education in our schools. The mission of the National Endowment for the Arts is to provide national leadership to encourage and preserve excellent art; to help make it available to all Americans, especially those who traditionally have not had access to it because of economic and geographic barriers; and to connect and engage children and youth with America's distinguished artistic legacy.

## **II. NEA GOALS AND ACCOMPLISHMENTS**

Over the last six years, the National Endowment for the Arts has refocused its programs to emphasize excellence and service to the American people. We have piloted and launched successful new approaches to public outreach and retooled our capacity to develop and deliver programs that celebrate the best of our culture.

Today, we celebrate America's great artists as recipients of NEA Jazz Masters, NEA National Heritage Fellows, National Opera Honors recipients, and National Medal of Arts awards -- not only with a one-time award, but also with national events broadcast on television and radio. We showcase the contributions of Jazz, Shakespeare and poetry in classrooms using our multi-media educational toolkits provided free to middle and high school teachers. And we provide exemplary materials and programming that make it possible for communities and generations to come together to read of a literary masterpiece.

The Arts Endowment's programs now reach into every corner of our nation — bringing the best of the arts and arts education to the broadest and most varied audiences possible. NEA grants are producing economic benefits throughout the country by nurturing local arts groups that enhance local economies. With each dollar awarded by the NEA generating on average \$6-\$7 dollars from other sources, the NEA is triggering an investment of approximately \$600 million for the arts from private donors and non-federal sources.

We welcome this opportunity to showcase the following programs and national initiatives that exemplify NEA's effort to serve the American people through commitment to excellence, broad geographic reach, and arts education.

### ***Challenge America: Reaching Every Community***

The creation of the *Challenge America* program in 2001 marked a turning point in NEA history by challenging the NEA to broaden its service to Americans outside established cultural centers. The *Challenge America* program enabled the NEA to broaden the geographic distribution of grants; although initially, it failed to fully realize its goals of reaching the entire nation. In an average year, NEA direct grants collectively reached only about three quarters of the United States (as measured by Congressional districts). Consequently, areas of the nation representing more than 70 million citizens received limited direct service from the agency.

Five years ago, we set the goal of awarding at least one direct grant to a deserving arts organization in every Congressional district in the United States. In fact, we even changed the name of the program from *Challenge America* to *Challenge America: Reaching Every Community*. More than just a name, this change reflected a renewed commitment to public service and outreach. In 2005, in 2006, and again in 2007, the NEA realized 100% coverage with direct grants awarded in all 435 districts. In 2008, the NEA will again achieve its 100% coverage goal. The Arts Endowment considers the new *Challenge America* program one of its central achievements.

### ***Partnerships***

Everything the NEA does it does in partnership. This is most obvious in the agency's basic grant matching requirements whereby the NEA leverages federal dollars by achieving private sector matches. Less evident but equally important this partnership strategy strengthens local arts organizations and builds communities. NEA's project grants develop partnerships in a direct way by encouraging local investment in arts organizations. Our national initiatives create partnerships of enormous range and diversity — uniting government, non-profit, and private sector organizations in support of arts and arts education across the nation.

A *Big Read* grant, for example, originates from the Arts Endowment but is administered by Arts Midwest, a regional arts organization. Each grant is then awarded to a local

applicant (usually a library, museum, or literary organization) which uses it to build local partnerships that can easily involve more than a hundred organizations, including schools, newspapers, public radio and television stations, cultural institutions, chambers of commerce, private business, and mayors' offices. Multiply these local networks across hundreds of *Big Read* cities in all 50 states, and one finds tens of thousands of partners all focused on celebrating literature. Such programs help realize the initial vision of the NEA by its founders 43 years ago to be a catalyst of American creativity in every corner of the nation.

### III. NATIONAL INITIATIVES

#### *American Masterpieces*

Many Americans are unfamiliar with the significant artistic and cultural achievements of our nation. They have few opportunities in school or daily life to learn about the arts or acquire skills to appreciate or participate in them. To address this challenge, the Arts Endowment established *American Masterpieces: Three Centuries of Artistic Genius*. It vividly embodies the goals of excellence and outreach by featuring educational programs along with presentations of artistic works themselves.

Now in its fourth year, *American Masterpieces* has added chamber music and presenting to visual arts, dance, choral music, musical theater, and literature. *American Masterpieces* grants have enabled 31 museums in 16 states to tour exhibitions to 142 cities across the nation, reaching an estimated audience of 12 million. Choral music grants have supported the creation of eight regional festivals celebrating American choral music in 12 states and the District of Columbia. Fifty-four grants are helping dance companies and college dance programs revive and tour American choreographic masterpieces. In musical theater, 13 theater companies in 18 states are reviving and touring significant American musicals. All these programs are reaching underserved rural and urban communities and introducing new generations to their rich artistic legacy.

#### *The Big Read*

In November 2007, the NEA followed its widely discussed 2004 report *Reading at Risk* with a comprehensive new study *To Read or Not to Read: A Question of National Consequence*. This new report presents the results of governmental and private sector studies on reading. The data in *To Read or Not To Read* paints a simple, yet sad, portrait of reading in America today -- ***Americans, especially teenagers and young adults, are reading less.*** Because they read less, they do not read as well. This decline in reading ability has a measurably negative impact on their educational, economic, personal, and civic lives and our nation's future.

Challenged to stem the decline in reading, the NEA has expanded the literary component of *American Masterpieces* called *The Big Read*. With Mrs. Laura Bush as its honorary chair, the Endowment is uniting communities and generations through the reading and

discussion of a common book. To make *The Big Read* work, communities are creating new partnerships involving schools, libraries, literary centers, arts councils, dance and theater companies, symphony orchestras, museums, and television and radio stations, as well as mayors' offices and chambers of commerce – all with the common goal of broadening the reading of quality literature in every segment of the community.

In 2008, *The Big Read* will provide grants to cities, large and small, across all 50 states. The goal is to reach a total of 400 cities, touching every U.S. Congressional district. Widely covered in the press, *The Big Read* has become a national symbol of the importance of reading in a free society.

### ***Poetry Out Loud***

Meanwhile, the NEA's high school poetry recitation contest, *Poetry Out Loud*, is currently completing its third national year in 2008. Cosponsored by the state arts agencies, this highly popular program reaches all fifty states plus the U.S. Virgin Islands and the District of Columbia. Since it began as a pilot program in 2005, nearly 450,000 students have entered the competition. This program combines literary education and practical training in public speaking with the thrill of competition.

One unexpected development in *Poetry Out Loud* has been its enormous popularity with the press, which often covers this arts program as if it were local sports. The NEA takes special pride in seeing young arts participants recognized publicly in their own communities on a par with local star athletes.

### ***Shakespeare in American Communities***

The NEA's Shakespeare program is now in its fifth year with *Shakespeare for a New Generation*, a program that focuses on providing American students an opportunity to see a live professional performance of Shakespeare. By the end of 2008, some 175 grants will have been awarded to 77 theater companies to bring productions of Shakespeare to more than 2,300 communities in mostly small and mid-sized cities, including 18 military bases. Nearly 2,000 actors have performed for 1.2 million students attending 3,600 middle and high schools.

The award-winning NEA *Shakespeare in American Communities* classroom toolkit has now been distributed free to 55,000 schools (32% of which are located in rural communities) reaching 20 million students. The NEA's Shakespeare program has reached deeply into all 50 states with an overwhelmingly positive response from teachers and students alike.

### ***NEA Jazz in the Schools***

The Arts Endowment's long-standing support of jazz was broadened in 2006 with the *NEA Jazz in the Schools* program, an engaging and substantive introduction to jazz created for high schools. Developed with Jazz at Lincoln Center, an academic tool-kit,

made available in January 2006, proved so popular that every kit was quickly requested by teachers across the U.S. The NEA's recent budget increase allowed us to create more kits to meet thousands of unfilled backorders. The *NEA Jazz in the Schools* kit is now used by over 11,000 teachers in 8,100 schools across all fifty states.

Used by teachers during Black History Month, as well as throughout the year, the program reaches some 5.6 million students, introducing students to jazz as a distinctively American art form as well as a powerful and positive force in African-American social history. This educational program was added while the agency maintained its *NEA Jazz Masters* touring, radio, and awards programs.

### ***Operation Homecoming and Other Programs for the Military***

The NEA concluded the first phase of its historic *Operation Homecoming* program last year. Supported by The Boeing Company, the program brought 55 writing workshops to U.S. military bases in five countries, involving 6,000 troops and their spouses. The program climaxed with the publication of wartime writing by U.S. troops in *The New Yorker* and a volume by Random House, as well as the production of two films, one of which became a finalist for the 2008 Academy Award for best full-length documentary.

The program was so meaningful to U.S. troops that we initiated a second phase focusing on the servicemen and servicewomen most deeply affected by the war. Phase II of *Operation Homecoming* will sponsor extended writing workshops led by noted American authors in 25 Veterans Administration and Department of Defense medical facilities as well as V.A. centers across the nation.

### ***International Initiatives***

When I came to the NEA in 2003, I was dismayed to learn how little was done in international cultural exchange. Over the past few years, the NEA has focused on developing several programs that showcase America's artistic creativity and excellence abroad. We now provide assistance to U.S. music and dance ensembles invited to perform in international festivals, and we have joined with the Open World Leadership Program to support short-term residencies for Russian artists and arts administrators with U.S. arts groups.

As a partner in the State Department's Global Cultural Initiative launched in 2006, the NEA has begun a series of international literary exchanges with Russia, Mexico, Egypt, Pakistan, and other nations. The State Department has recognized the potential of *The Big Read* to serve as an effective vehicle for cultural diplomacy. *Big Read* programs have now been initiated as mutual cultural exchanges between the U.S. and Russia, Egypt, and Mexico. American novels are featured in civic reading programs in those nations while classics of Russian, Egyptian, and Mexican fiction have become part of the U.S. domestic program. These bilateral literary programs also provide the basis for unprecedented exchanges as groups of writers, teachers, and librarians visit the host cities in each nation.



#### IV. LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

As we look to the future, at least two major challenges face the NEA and the citizens it serves. The first is the diminished state of arts education in the nation's schools. There is now an entire generation of young Americans for whom the arts have not played a significant role in their intellectual and personal development. This trend is not merely a cultural matter but a social and economic one. As these young men and women enter the new global economy of the twenty-first century, many of them will not have had opportunities to develop the skills of innovation and creativity they need to succeed. American schools need help to better realize and achieve the full human potential of their students. While we are proud of our current arts education programs, we are also deeply conscious of the millions of students, especially in the earlier grades, whom we do not reach at all.

The second challenge speaks to an even broader issue, namely America's place in the world. The United States needs to expand its cultural exchanges with other nations. This investment in cultural diplomacy would not only benefit American artists by providing them with greater opportunities, but more important, it would help the nation itself more effectively communicate with the rest of the world in ways that transcend political and economic issues. The arts have the potential to represent the best aspects of a free and diverse democracy in a way that speaks to the hearts and minds of people everywhere. It would be an enormous missed opportunity if the United States did not use the creativity of its own people in addressing the rest of the planet.

The arts offer us an irreplaceable way of understanding and expressing the world – equal to but distinct from scientific and conceptual methods. Art addresses us in the fullness of our being – simultaneously speaking to our intellect, emotions, intuition, imagination, memory and physical senses. There are some truths about life that can be expressed only as stories or songs or images. Art delights, instructs, consoles. It educates our emotions. And it remembers. Art awakens, enlarges, refines and restores our humanity.

As we contemplate the future of the National Endowment for the Arts, we remain confident in the continuing relevance of our mission to bring the best of the arts—new and established—to all Americans. The Arts Endowment's goal is to enrich the civic life of the nation by making the fruits of creativity truly available throughout the United States. In a dynamic nation with a growing and diverse population, this goal will remain a constant challenge: a great nation deserves great art.