



House Bill 96: FY 2026-2027 Biennial Operating Budget

Senate Higher Education Committee
Senator Kristina Roegner, Chair

Tuesday, April 29, 10 a.m.

Testimony submitted by Donna S. Collins, Executive Director, Ohio Arts Council (OAC)

Good afternoon, Chair Roegner, Vice Chair Timken, Ranking Member Ingram, and members of the committee. My name is Donna Collins, and I am the executive director of the Ohio Arts Council.

On behalf of OAC Chair Ginger Warner, and our board members, staff, grantees, and partners—as well as artists living and working across the state—I want to express my deep appreciation for the General Assembly's past and present appropriations for the arts in Ohio. In 2025, the OAC will celebrate 60 years of public funding for the arts, thanks to your bedrock support.

The Arts: A Strong, Innovative Investment

Your longstanding investment has strengthened both our economy and our communities, producing significant fiscal returns that benefit Ohio residents wherever they live. With our board's guidance, OAC staff remains mission-focused through fulfilling grant awards in all 88 counties, supporting arts education for children, elevating the profiles of Ohio's world-class artists and arts organizations, and carefully stewarding public funds.

Ongoing research indicates the fiscal impact of the arts in Ohio is immense—and has now fully recovered to surpass its pre-pandemic highs. A 2024 study by Dr. Michael Carroll, formerly of Bowling Green State University, demonstrates that Ohio's arts sector supports more than 292,000 jobs, contributes more than \$63.3 billion to the state's economy, and generates about \$6.5 billion in annual tax revenues at the local, state, and federal levels. In total, your GRF investment in the arts through the OAC comprises about 0.06% of the state's total GRF appropriations, but it produces a big return on investment.

Related to the economy, arts education has a significant impact in helping students achieve better academic outcomes and develop our workforce. An education that includes the arts cultivates skills like critical thinking, focus, creativity and innovation, and problem-solving—the types of skills sought by today's employers. National studies indicate that arts education improves literacy and math skills, attendance rates, high school graduation rates, standardized test scores, and the likelihood of students from low-income backgrounds completing college with a degree. Fortunately, Ohio students and parents recognize the value of arts education, with more than 34,000 students receiving a fine and performing arts diploma seal last year, representing about 30% of Ohio's most recent graduating class.

Ohio residents appreciate, understand, and prioritize ongoing investment in the arts as an essential role of the public sector. Our most recent 88-county survey revealed that 94% of Ohioans believe



public funds should go toward the arts. This figure has risen over time, up from 70% in 1990. Moreover, 83% of Ohioans are already aware that public funds support the arts in Ohio. In short, Ohioans know their tax dollars are invested in the arts—and strongly support their continued investment. We are humbled that Ohioans continue to authorize and support our public purpose.

In turn, our staff works hard for Ohio's citizens, with 99% of the agency's applicants stating they are satisfied or very satisfied with the overall customer service offered by the OAC. Good grantmaking is labor-intensive. It consists of outreach to communities with untapped potential, especially among rural areas and smaller nonprofits that lack experience in grant-writing or working with government. It ensures tax dollars are properly awarded. It means our staff goes "beyond the grant" to add value to the ability of Ohio's arts and cultural sector to succeed and compete for private grants from philanthropists and foundations, recognition, awards, tourism dollars, and more.

Advancing and Living Our Mission: Invest, Engage, Innovate, and Lead

The OAC's state appropriation is a direct investment in our mission—to strengthen Ohio's communities culturally, educationally, and economically in every county. Developed with input from the arts sector, our strategic plan is designed to live our mission and aligns with four action areas: Invest, Engage, Innovate, and Lead.

At the core of the OAC's work is our investment and grant-making activities to serve artists, arts organizations, schools, and nonprofits. Each of our grant programs annually go through a top-to-bottom review to respond to the field's needs.

To give you a few examples, the OAC:

- provides reliable grant support for nonprofit arts organizations through our flagship Sustainability program;
- funds opportunities for professional teaching artists to teach their skills to Ohio's preK-12 students;
- offers career development funding for emerging artists and artists with disabilities, helping them maintain their independence and pursue a livelihood;
- develops and trains the workforce through apprenticeships in the traditional arts, preserving Ohio's heritage;
- rewards excellence in artistic disciplines and innovative arts programming;
- puts funding to work in every county, expanding our statewide impact and presence.

The agency also continues to focus on assessing and improving itself to achieve new efficiencies, making the application process more streamlined and efficient over the last decade. That has become evident through dramatic increases in grant applications. As context, the OAC's staff of 19 anticipates processing nearly 4,100 applications and 2,600 grant awards in all 88 counties in the current biennium. This is an extraordinary increase compared to about 15 years ago, when a larger staff of 26 processed only 2,200 applications resulting in 1,100 grants in about 50 counties. In other words, although we have a quarter less staff, we now process almost twice as many applications and service well over twice as many grants. To this end, we appreciate the inclusion of an administrative



appropriation increase to help alleviate the challenges of record application volume, past inflationary pressures, and state-negotiated, regular personnel cost increases.

We believe applications have increased for several reasons. We have cut red tape, bolstered online application platforms and review processes, and conducted continuous outreach in new communities to listen to constituents and help them explore funding opportunities.

In turn, more nonprofits than ever before have become eligible for our operating support grant program, Sustainability. This program currently provides four-year general operating support for 446 arts and cultural organizations of all sizes in all arts genres. FY 2026 will be an open application year for newly eligible nonprofits. In our last open cycle two years ago, 112 organizations gained eligibility for Sustainability and received funding, increasing the applicant pool by 30%. This same effect is repeating in FY 2026, when an estimated 193 organizations will be newly eligible.

Expanding access to the arts through public funding is a welcome signal of a strong and growing creative economy, but the challenge is clear. As we anticipate this increased demand next biennium, our board will face difficult funding determinations to allocate limited resources while meeting the greater number of requests for arts and cultural funding from our sector. Already, the OAC has tightened some eligibility requirements to further focus the grant program's intent, but by and large, the agency hopes to hold current grantees essentially harmless from the growth of the arts sector and public demand for arts programming.

Changing gears, if investment is the core of our work at the OAC, then innovation is our heart—whether we're encouraging it in our grantees or embodying it ourselves. In line with Governor DeWine's emphasis on children's initiatives, much of our work in this area has concentrated on arts education for Ohio's students.

Most notably in arts education, the grant program titled TeachArtsOhio has grown substantially. TeachArtsOhio is the agency's reinvigorated approach to teaching artist residencies in Ohio schools. Begun in 2015, this nationally-lauded program provides Ohio students with in-depth and impactful arts learning experiences, connecting high-quality Ohio teaching artists with students for a grading period, semester, or full academic year. Lessons and experiences are aligned with academic content standards. Program applicants have typically focused on students residing in districts with higher-than-average child poverty rates, whether rural or urban. I am proud to share that we believe no other state awards as many yearly grants to schools in support of arts education as the OAC.

In the current biennium, TAO benefits more than 100,000 Ohio students and educators, reaching 30,000 more than the prior biennium thanks to the agency's historic appropriation level. The program's popularity has endured, reaching new highs throughout the pandemic and now beyond. Arts education remains an essential component to a complete education, and again, we hope to support as many teaching artist residencies in schools as possible, given available resources.



State and Federal Appropriations

Looking at the full picture, the House version of the FY 2026-2027 budget recommends GRF appropriations at \$52.5 million to support and strengthen the arts in Ohio. Again, this reflects an administrative increase to accommodate our work and flat funding for state-source OAC grants, which are held at the FY 2025 level. I want again to express my enduring gratitude to lawmakers and to Governor DeWine for your continued faith and investment in the arts in Ohio—in the past, now, and in the future—across governors, political beliefs, and legislative chambers.

In addition to the state's investment, the National Endowment for the Arts has awarded the OAC one of the top three largest grants in the nation for state arts agencies for 15 consecutive years, recognizing the excellence of Ohio's arts nonprofits and creative individuals and building on Ohio's state appropriation. No NEA funds are used on our administrative expenses; all federal dollars are re-invested as grants. As such, the OAC assembles its grant budgets holistically, state and federal dollars considered together when determining program allocations.

In closing, Ohio's artistic community is one of our state's greatest selling points. The arts create jobs, improve our competitiveness, and anchor our communities. Arts learning opportunities educate, inspire, and equip our children with the creative skills they need to compete in today's economy. Your support for the arts remains a sound investment that yields significant returns, particularly for a state like Ohio with a powerful arts economy.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you. I would be happy to answer questions.