

Connecting arts organizations with schools

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At Tuesday's Southeastern Connecticut Cultural Coalition-sponsored session about helping to connect arts organizations to schools, coalition Executive Director Wendy Bury brought up "the 'Hamilton' effect."

The "Hamilton" in question is the Lin-Manuel Miranda musical that is the biggest hit on Broadway right now. Bury noted that The Rockefeller Foundation has provided a \$1.5 million grant that is subsidizing 20,000 tickets to "Hamilton" for 11th-grade students. The money also is going to develop educational material that helps students "contextualize the show," she said. It's all part of an educational partnership between "Hamilton," The Rockefeller Foundation and the New York City Department of Education.

The upshot, Bury said, is that this translates to 20,000 guaranteed seat sales. It brings teenagers into the theater. It excites the students. And the show is worked into the school curriculum.

"Really, the effect is this connection is a win-win-win-win-win," Bury said.

Which led to her question to a group of panelists: "How does an organization become their own 'Hamilton' in their region?"

There wasn't a simple answer to that, but Jacqueline Coleman, education consultant for the arts at Connecticut State Board of Education, noted that Miranda didn't set out to create that monster hit or that educational partnership. Rather, he wrote something he was passionate about. So, she told the artists and arts promoters gathered at the meeting, "Do your best work. Do it authentically. Don't give up."

Panelists including Coleman spoke to about 75 people at the "Connecting to the Curriculum" session. It was part of the Cultural Coalition's Rising Tide Cultural Summit held at the Charter Oak Federal Credit Union in Waterford.

The panelists spoke about their organizations, which ranged from school districts to LEARN to the Connecticut State Board of Education, and they answered questions that people submitted online and those that they asked during the session.

One query was about how an arts group can move from doing a single performance or project with a school to having a larger, more ongoing relationship. Among the ideas: Talk to someone you have a personal connection to — a teacher, for instance — and build from there.

Some school systems have a specific person on staff whom arts presenters can contact. Two of them — Kate Fioravanti, district arts supervisor for the New London Public Schools, and Kaitlyn O'Leary, director of strategic initiatives for the Norwich Public Schools — were members of the panel. Fioravanti said that some organizations will come in to talk with teachers about a potential project and co-plan it with them — Flock Theatre of New London, she noted, has done that.

Kate Ericson, director of professional development at LEARN, noted that Stonington-based New England Science & Sailing's representatives developed a relationship with a New London principal and some key teachers that allowed them to listen to these school leaders and find out what they were trying to do. That led to some students participating in a NESS on-the-water project, and the NESS projects with the schools grew over time.

“It just kept getting bigger and bigger, and the opportunities were expanding for the kids, because (the people from NESS) were constantly at the table — how does this work, how do we support you?” she said.

The other ideas that panelists broached included an arts group that might create a small study guide that teachers could use after a performance. So, for instance, instead of having kids attend a concert without much of a follow-up, the band or orchestra could give the teacher a few questions or subjects to engage the children in later on at school.

Or, another suggestion went, a couple of groups might work together to develop something that is a more diverse offering.

