



AN OPEN LETTER

to Museum Directors, Museum Board Members, and Community Organizations/Leaders

August 13, 2020

Dear Colleagues:

I hope this message finds you healthy and well as you navigate the impact of COVID-19 on your institution and communities. My name is Thom Knab, and I am President of the National Art Education Association (NAEA) as well as an elementary school visual arts teacher in the state of New York. My students and I are avid museum attendees. We regularly engage with the art and educators at our local museums, both in person and online, as well as with museums across the country via their digital offerings.

As museums and cultural institutions make adjustments to meet the current social distancing restrictions, weigh priorities and budgets, and plan for the future, I want to reach out to you in support of a continued investment in museum educators and museum education programs. To keep art museums relevant, accessible, and connected to the community, NAEA respectfully requests that museum education departments not be more negatively impacted than other departments in these difficult economic times.

During this pandemic, museum education staff across the country have been incredibly agile in shifting their programming from in person to online. Much of the content shared on art museum websites has been developed and adapted by museum educators to meet people where they are. Museum educators are the professionals with deep knowledge of art and learning theory to create and sustain engaging virtual experiences for people of all ages.

Museums everywhere are making definitive commitments to diversity, equity, accessibility, and inclusion (DEAI) work. Museum education departments have traditionally led the way in these efforts, often doing the slow, difficult work for years. Museum education staff must be retained to continue the forward momentum they have created and ensure that authentic change is possible.

Museum educators have been cultivating relationships with many facets of the community for years, and these relationships need continued care to remain sustainable. Eliminating museum education staff who facilitate these partnerships sends a clear message to external communities that they do not matter. To be certain, DEAI initiatives and practices need to be part of the work of every museum staff member—but without education staff, the efforts will undoubtedly take

longer and be less impactful. Museum educators are critical bridge builders between communities and collections.

NAEA asserts that excellent museum education staff and teaching are necessary to foster impactful and memorable learning experiences in the museum environment. Excellent museum educators use art to help people of all ages, abilities, and backgrounds to see and understand the world in a variety of ways and provide them with knowledge and skills to engage with and interpret art on their own. The skilled facilitation by museum staff creates more opportunities for personal connection and meaning-making. Eliminating museum education staff means eliminating visitors' deep connection to artwork. Review NAEA's Position Statement on Excellence in Art Museum Teaching [here](#).

The NAEA Museum Education Division has partnered with the Association of Art Museum Directors (AAMD) and Randi Korn & Associates (RK&A) to perform a nationwide research study of facilitated single-visit art museum programs, using inquiry-based pedagogies for students in grades 4 through 6. This study, supported by a National Leadership Grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) and the Samuel H. Kress Foundation demonstrated that single-visit field trips provide unique opportunities to engage with original works of art in a different learning environment. By allowing students to look closely, share ideas, and discover personal connections, facilitated single-visit art museum programs inspire and foster students' creativity and curiosity. The results of this study help validate that the work of museum educators is important and impactful to student learning and skill development. View the study user guide [here](#).

NAEA supports field trips or field-based learning embedded within the curriculum and as such, field trips or field-based learning should be provided for all learners—regardless of socioeconomic status, academic achievement, behavioral needs, artistic ability, physical or cognitive abilities or geographic factors. View NAEA's Position Statement on Field Trips or Field-Based Learning [here](#). Museum education staff are skillfully transitioning in-person field trips to virtual options. If museum education staff and programs are cut, thousands of students will lose the benefits of these virtual programs. When in-person field trips are possible again, it will be difficult to bring teachers and students back to the museum if they have not been engaged throughout the closure. An investment in museum education staff now is an investment in museum visitors of the future, as research has shown that a key predictor of whether an adult visits museums is whether they visited museums as a student.

The arts have a unique ability to build connective fibers among communities. It is the museum education staff that have cultivated and facilitated these connections, and we need these connections now more than ever, especially for our students facing systemic, socioeconomic, technologic, and geographic inequities.

For the next generation of young people, to whom the visual arts provide a lifeline, as they did for me—I ask you to take a stand for museum education and ensure that, even amid difficult budget decisions, a continued commitment to retaining museum educators remains a priority.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Thom Knab". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Thom" and last name "Knab" clearly distinguishable.

Thom Knab
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