

Impact of COVID-19 on Theatre Education



SUMMARY

Several recent studies have confirmed the devastating effect of the current pandemic on the arts. The economic impact of COVID-19 on the arts and cultural sector across the U.S. is estimated at \$13.9 billion (Americans for the Arts, September 2020).

Less frequently discussed but also profound is the pandemic's financial implications on middle and high school theatre programs. Our analysis shows these programs have suffered substantial revenue losses, with 91% of schools forced to cancel performances in spring 2020. For many programs, ticket revenue provides their main source of funding, as 44% receive no financial support from their districts. Money lost to investments in canceled productions coupled with lack of spring ticket sales created a ripple effect on current season budgets. In fact, 22% of programs faced cuts for the 2020-21 academic year.

While not unexpected, the cancellations and lost revenue are troubling and have the potential to leave school theatre programs at significant risk in the coming years. Many survey respondents reported 2019-20 revenue losses that were substantially more than they earned, and it is likely the economic downturn will substantially limit other funding support this school year and beyond. For teachers, the impact raises short-term concerns about student recruitment, morale, and motivation as well as longer-term uncertainty about reductions in program capacity, external funding, and student opportunities.

METHODOLOGY

In August 2020, the Educational Theatre Association surveyed more than 11,000 middle and high school theatre educators about the status of their programs in the pandemic environment. Nearly 2,400 teachers responded to the survey, "The Impact of COVID-19 on Theatre Education," offering a snapshot of how the pandemic has reshaped both their teaching methods and student learning opportunities.

The survey asked questions about how teachers concluded the 2019-20 school year; the financial impact of canceled spring productions; how schools were approaching the 2020-21 year; and the tools and resources teachers were using to deliver online instruction to students. The survey also included questions about teachers' expectations regarding fall learning and play production.

Respondents relatively proportionally represented urban (34%), suburban/urban (38%), and rural (26%) districts, with the majority (77%) leading co-curricular theatre programs. Nearly 70% of respondents were employed in schools with populations of between 501 and 2,500 students.

SPRING 2020 CLASSROOM IMPACT AND FALL EXPECTATIONS

A significant majority (71%) of teachers completed the 2020 spring term virtually, using a variety of instructional strategies. In order of likelihood, the most common were:

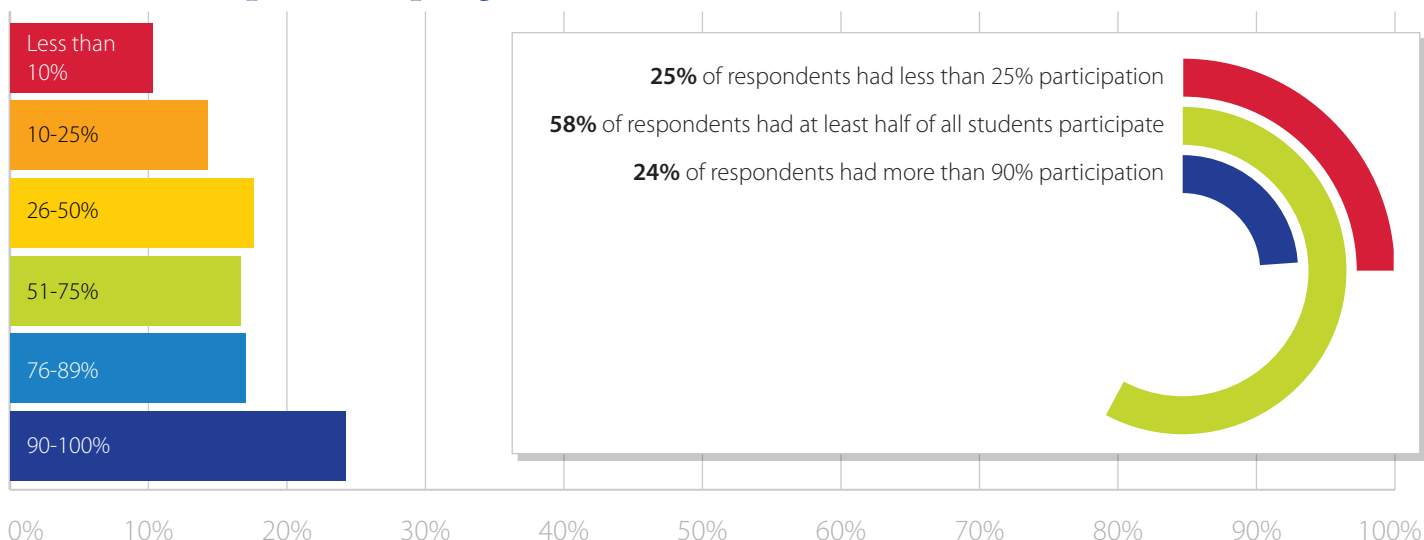
- Virtual lessons taught asynchronously and available on-demand.
- Project-based lessons spanning multiple class periods.
- Instructional videos or digital games.
- Digital versions of lesson packets with worksheets.

District assistance for virtual instruction was supplied in the form of additional hardware (iPads, Chromebooks, and laptops), software, and technology support (via internet hotspots or internet access plans, for example).

Teachers reported varying degrees of success regarding student engagement with virtual instruction. While 41% of

educators said the great majority of their students participated in virtual classes in spring 2020, 25% indicated less than 25% of students signed on to virtual classes.

Student Participation in Spring 2020 Online Classes



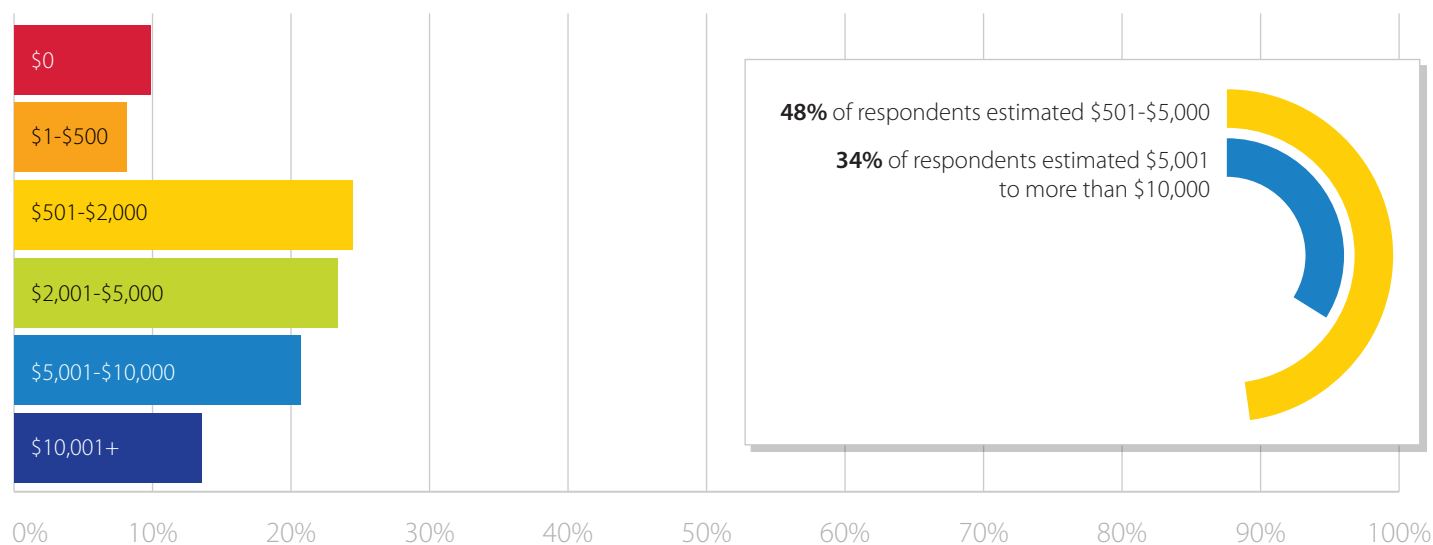
The most common reasons given for not participating included lack of motivation due to pass/fail assessment models and a lack of access to a computer or high-speed broadband internet.

Engaging students virtually will continue to be important during the current school year, as 75% of respondents said they were starting school in either a virtual or hybrid (some online/some in-person) model. At the time of the survey, only 13% of teachers expected to return to full-time, in-person instruction in fall 2020.

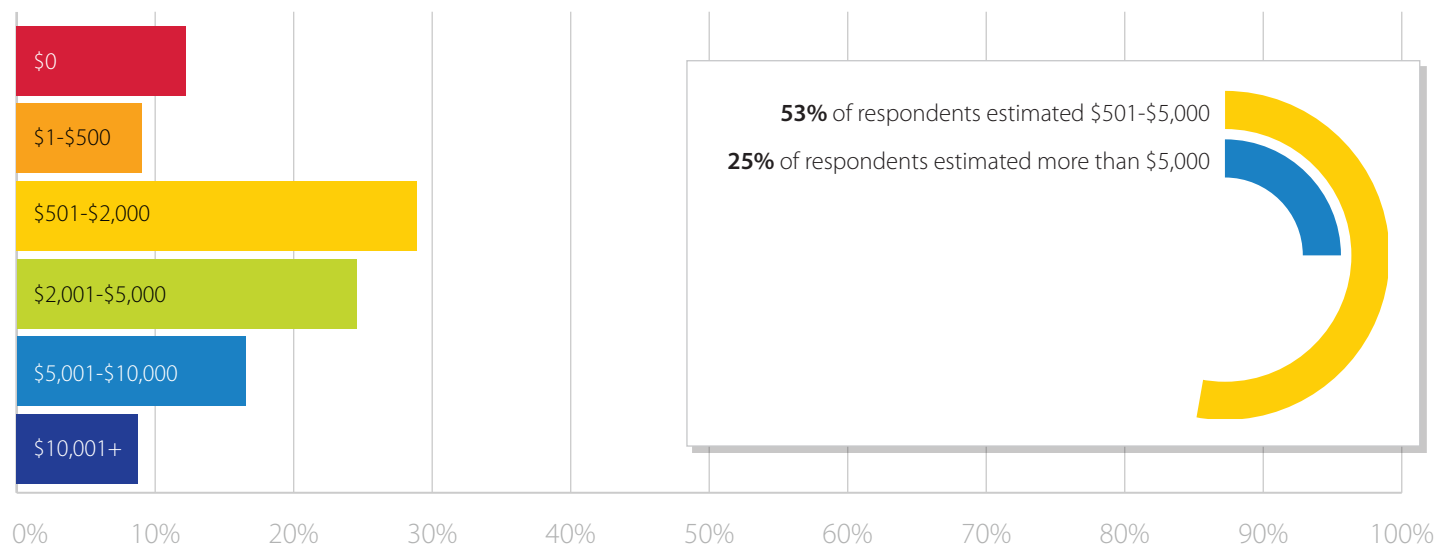
EFFECTS OF SPRING PRODUCTION CANCELLATIONS

Though the size of school theatre programs surveyed varied greatly, one commonality was clear: Most programs rely to a large degree on ticket sales from productions to fund their activities. Spring performance cancellations resulted in significant revenue losses for these programs, with approximately half of respondents reporting a loss between \$500 and \$5,000 and another 25% reporting losses totaling between \$5,001 and \$10,000.

Estimated 2019-20 Box Office Revenue

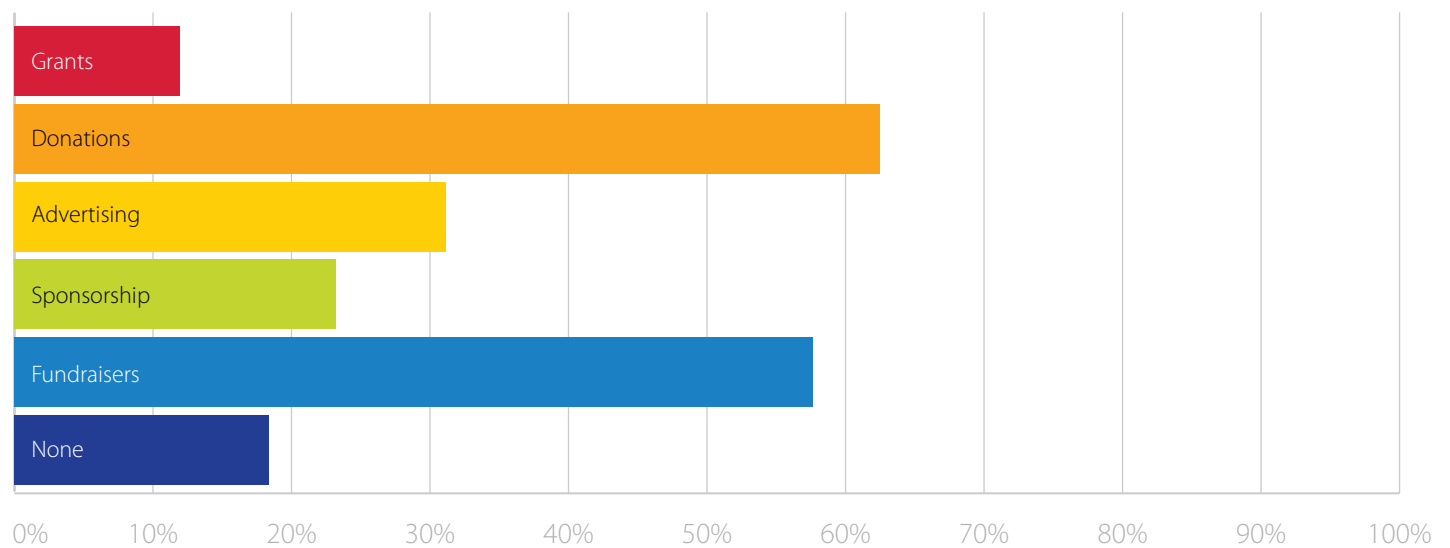


Estimated Lost Revenue Due to Performance Cancellations



Of the schools surveyed, 44% receive no portion of their theatre budget from their school district, with ticket sales as the primary source of program revenue. Schools also are reliant on other funding, most prominently through donations (63%), fundraisers (58%), and advertising (31%). Twenty-five percent of teachers said their schools received \$1-500 in external funding in the 2019-20 school year; 46%, \$501-3,000; 13%, \$3,001-5,000; and 15%, \$5,001-10,000 plus.

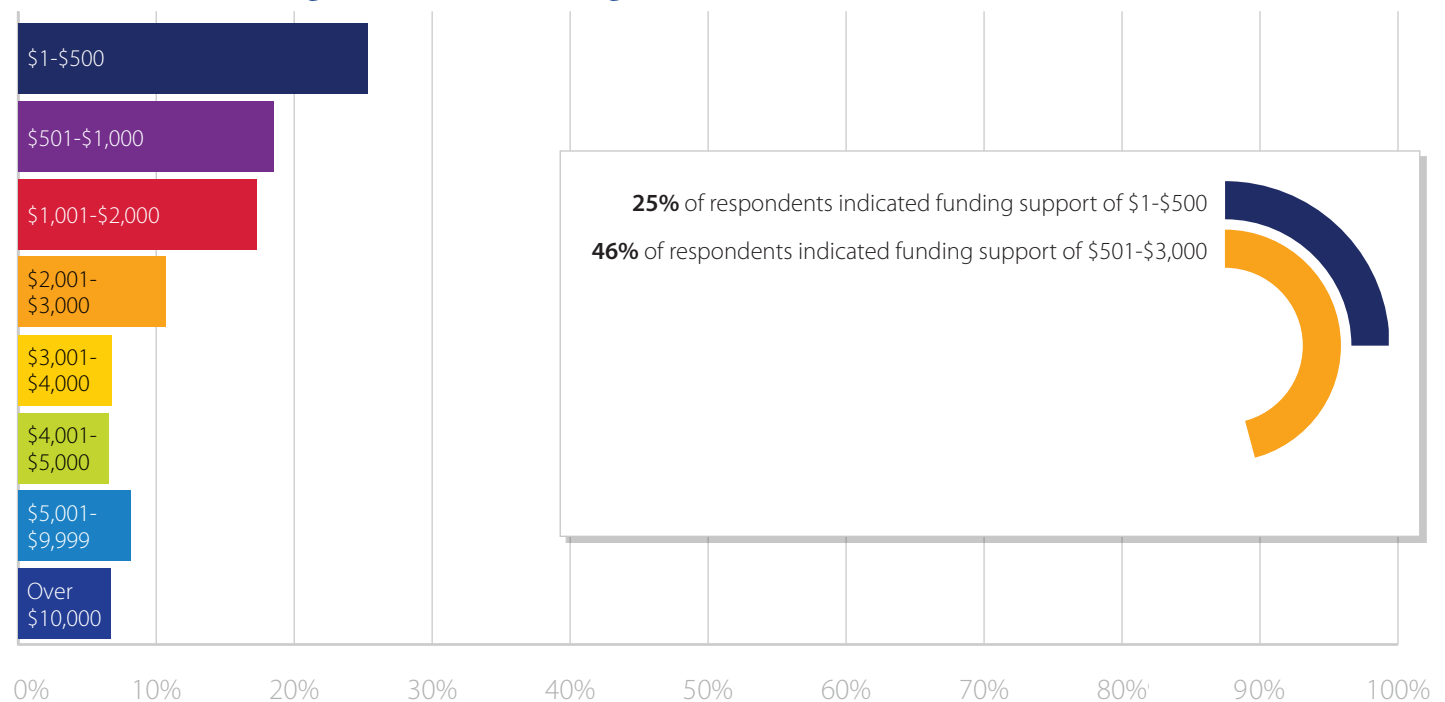
School Theatre Program Other Funding Support



63% of respondents indicated donation funding
31% of respondents indicated advertising funding
58% of respondents indicated fundraiser revenue



School Theatre Program Other Funding Totals

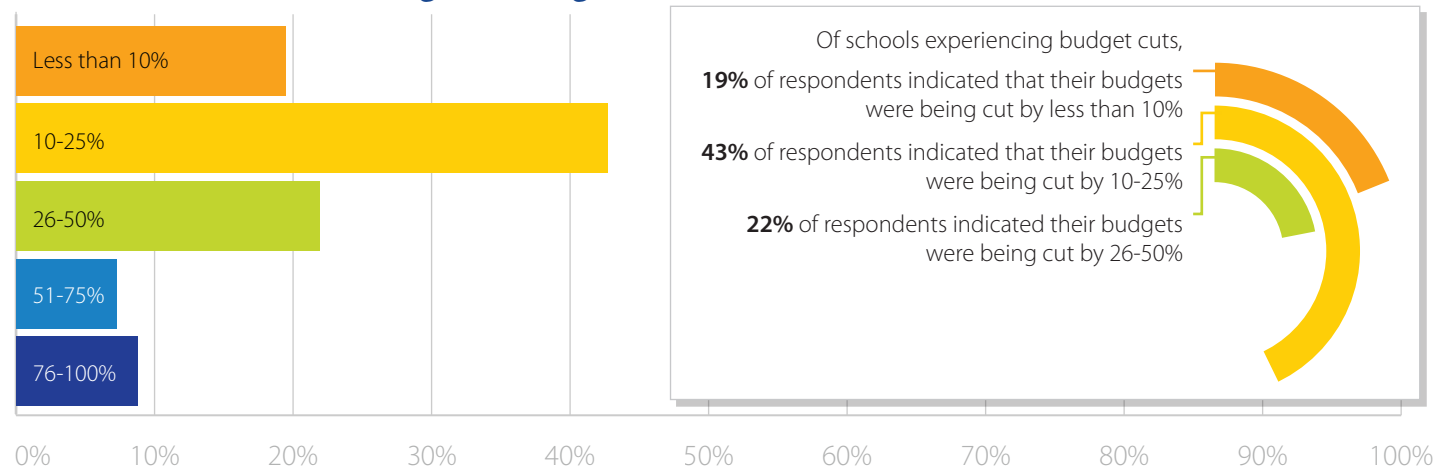


Most programs (83%) were considering virtual productions for fall 2020, though moderate to strong interest also was indicated for streamed (62%) and outdoor (51%) productions. Only 19% of teachers expressed confidence they would produce in-person performances during the 2020-21 school year (though 59% were holding out hope they might be able to do so).

CONCLUSION

The silver lining to the survey is that more than 97% of educators indicated they were returning to their positions in fall 2020. Of those with co-curricular programs, 64% expected to teach the same number of theatre classes. However, 22% said their program budgets had been cut compared to the previous year, with nearly half of that number expecting cuts between 10 and 25%.

2020-21 School Theatre Program Budget Cuts



Beyond the financial repercussions expected from lost investments in canceled shows and reduced external funding support, teachers expressed additional concerns for the 2020-21 school year and beyond, including:

- Recruitment of future students
- Reduced program capacity
- Smaller productions limiting student performance opportunities
- Marginalization of extracurricular programs
- Uncertainty and flux
- Morale

The majority of respondents also indicated it was unlikely their district would permit outside travel to view live theatre performances or attend in-person conferences, with 59% answering “no” and 38% answering “maybe.”

Research shows school theatre programs are more important now than ever. Arts education supports the social and emotional wellbeing of students, nurtures the creation of a welcoming school environment where students can express themselves in safe and positive ways, and is part of a well-rounded education as understood and supported by federal and state policymakers.

It is clear, however, that school theatre programs face grave threats from the effects of the pandemic. Many school districts, faced with lost instructional time, limited capacity, and the added resources needed to address new modes of teaching and learning, are likely to retool their curricula to emphasize core subject areas, such as math and reading. Theatre, along with the other arts, may be considered an expendable subject area as district leaders struggle to adapt their schools, teachers, and students to a new reality of education that is likely to endure for the foreseeable future.

For theatre education to maintain its place in schools, advocates will need broad-based community support and a well-defined rationale for why theatre education should continue to be part of the well-rounded education of all students. This survey suggests both optimism and peril in the coming years; how those who care about the art of theatre and its place in education respond will demand another survey. The results, we hope, will be positive, for our students, our teachers, and our schools.