

PPAA News

By Sarah Ackermann, PhD



As an art educator, I have spent a good majority of my career working in the state of Illinois. [The Illinois Art Education](#) has shaped me, my practice, and my own personal advocacy approaches.



Like many state associations, Illinois provides a toolkit for practitioners to reference while advocating for themselves, their programs, and most importantly, their students. I invite you to take a look at [IAEA's advocacy page](#), which provides resources, sample advocacy statements, and information concerning upcoming events and initiatives, including Advocacy Day, 2021.



As you peruse the resources, pay special attention to the Southern Illinois Outreach tab, where you will find the photograph featured here.

The enthusiastic and passionate leader speaking in the photograph is [Josh Shearer](#), Advocacy Advisor and South Council Vice President for Illinois Art Education Association.

I had the opportunity to sit down and speak with Josh, over Zoom of course, to talk about advocacy in the state of Illinois, in the country at-large, and what individual educators can do to help lead the charge and impact policy during challenging times.



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My Interview with Josh Shearer



**What is your art story?
What role has the Illinois Art Education Association played in that story?**

Josh: I decided when I was twelve years old that I wanted to be an art teacher because it seemed like teaching was the best way to impact the future. Really, art was the only class I ever learned anything, and so it only made sense to teach art.

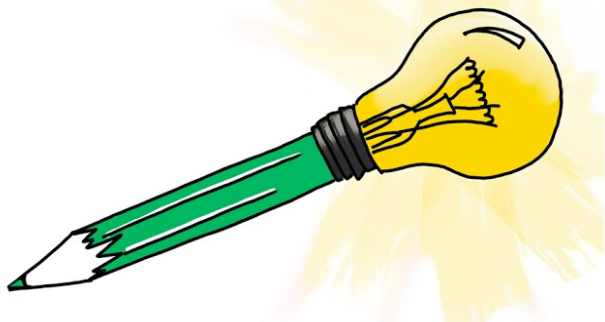
When I was twenty-two, I had acquired my own art teacher's job. However, at twenty-six they had cut my art program all together. If that hadn't happened, I would still be there today.

I substitute taught for a year. In 2011 I was offered a job at ANNA CCSD 37

teaching third through eighth grade. That same year, I attended my very first Illinois Art Education Association Conference since college.

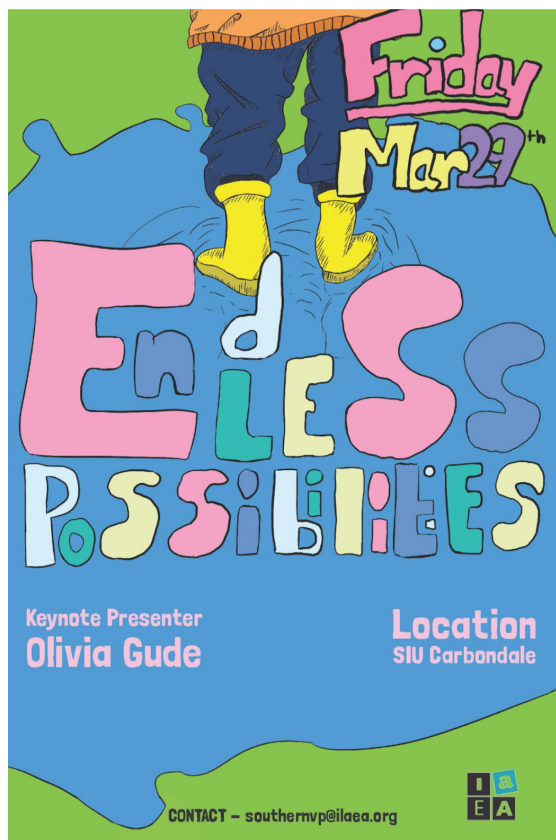
While I was attending the IAEA conference, there was a meeting of the South and Central Councils at the time. South Council in Illinois was struggling and did not have a lot of membership. Rather than do away with the South Council, I was elected in as leader. I have now served in that role for nine years. During that time, I started up the Southern Illinois Art Education Conference, which I've hosted seven times now.





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Posters advertising previous Southern Illinois Art Education Conferences

How did those beginning efforts lead to your current work in advocacy?

Josh: The main reason I took on the role of South Council leader was to serve my students. That is how I begin my advocacy journey for the arts at-large.

I've helped develop the new learning standards for Illinois. I worked closely

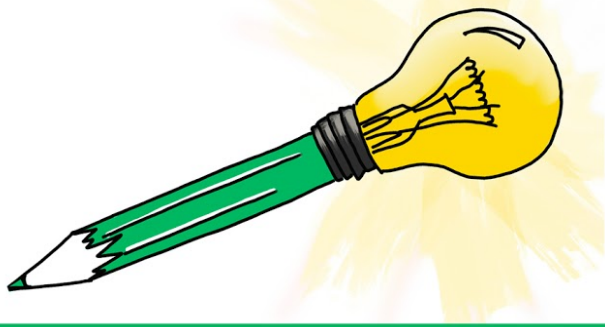
with the Arts Alliance on many things, including the Every Student Succeeds Act - the biggest policy that we got through at a statewide level. Over time, I have continued to get louder and louder.

In this role, with IAEA, I'm helping others find their voices. Three years ago I started a grassroots team. We call ourselves Art for All and we meet once a month.

We've been able to advocate for a full-time art teacher for a nearby school district. This is the kind of work that really motivates me and others in the group to continue pushing forward.

I like to show up at board meetings. I like to make a stir. Recently, I had an article featured in our local paper because our sister town does not have an art program. In response to that, I've invited all the students from that school to attend my remote art class sessions. If students want to learn, I want to give them that chance.

[Link to Article: Teacher Seeks Access For All to Visual Arts \(The Gazette-Democrat, 2020\)](#)



What does the future hold as you continue in this role?

Josh: As I grow into this role as Illinois Art Education Association Advocacy Advisor, I partner a lot with the IAEA President and fellow executive leadership. President, Nick Hostert and I both attended the Illinois State Board of Education meeting where they voted unanimously to approve the [arts indicator](#) (De La Rosa, 2020).

Now, like so many others during the time of COVID-19, we are navigating this new Zoom world. We continue to research and explore how different districts are handling the current learning environment. That research can inform our work when it comes to arts advocacy.

The arts are important, and I want to make sure I can help all students receive the arts education they deserve. My number one goal is to make sure that every student in public schools has a visual arts teacher.

How can others help with the cause?

Josh: Being loud - that's my style, but I understand, that might not be

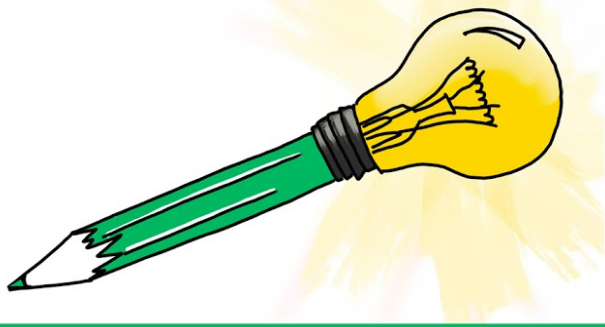
everyone's style when it comes to arts advocacy. And we are all spread thin right now, myself included. We can take small steps and make a collective impact.

*What we **can** do is inform. We can write letters to leaders. If we fail to get a response, we can send those same letters to school boards.*

And we can prompt students to write letters. What a surreal time we're living in right now. Hopefully we can begin to approach a new normal. In anticipation for that new normal, I plan on sending letters to legislators from students across the state letting them know how visual art education is impacting their lives in positive ways. Additionally, I plan to send actual student artwork to newly elected or re-elected leaders. This can serve as a tangible, visible reminder of the influence and importance of art in students' lives.

Finally, I would like to plan a huge advocacy day in which people come together to advocate for the arts.

These are the ideas that I have right now for reaching policy makers in positive ways. With the current state of



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the union, I hope that this can happen sooner rather than later, however the restrictions brought on by the pandemic makes progress seem a long way off at this point. That is frustrating! However in the meantime, I hope that we can collectively find peace through visual art. I think a lot of people are looking for peace and understanding and we can do this by looking at, talking about, creating and sharing art.

*I'm hopeful that we can use art to bring about a new normal, a **better** normal. Well, I take that back. Let's not shoot for normal. Let's create something **extraordinary**. Visual art can be something that brings people together and help us be a little more empathetic and a little more understanding. I think we need this more than ever.*

Closure



Special thanks to Josh Shearer for reminding us all of the healing power of the arts. More than ever, students need art in their lives as a way to cope, to

reflect and to celebrate, even during a time of uncertainty.

Let's join Josh in his advocacy measures. I invite you to explore the resources linked throughout this issue of **PPAA News** and reach out to your local or state leadership. You can do this personally, or get your students involved in dynamic ways. Let's all do our part to advocate passionately for the field.

References

De La Rosa, S. (2020). Illinois adopts arts as a weighted success indicator in ESSA accountability. *Education Dive*.
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