

# NYC should expand support for teaching artists

## BE OUR GUEST

BY KIMBERLY OLSEN

**T**eaching artists, practicing professionals who deliver arts education to schools and communities across the city, power New York City's rich arts ecosystem. These folks are educators, business owners, community advocates, and working artists who ensure all New Yorkers — regardless of where they live — have access to the arts.

But like many working New Yorkers, they are increasingly at risk. Years of disinvestment, inconsistent arts funding and bureaucratic contracting delays have hollowed out the robust infrastructure that allows these artists to educate fellow New Yorkers. The pandemic, combined with inflation and stagnating wages, have added to the problem.

All these factors combined are creating new challenges for teaching artists, many of whom already struggle to support themselves while carrying out the city's arts education mandate.

It's why the city must make a clear investment in teaching artists and keep NYC affordable for them to teach and live.

According to a recent study, the median income for teaching artists in 2023 had not meaningfully increased since data recording began in 2018, despite a 28% increase in the cost of living during the same period. Nearly seven in 10 teaching artists have a household income below the NYC median, while 79% say their work as a teaching artist does not support living in or near the city. The vast majority of these working professionals are also forced to pay out of pocket for health care and other benefits.

Meanwhile, city disinvestment and an unresponsive bureaucracy are making it harder to retain teaching artists. A 2024 survey on the city's MTAC contracting processes for arts services found that most organizations contracting with the city to deliver arts programs reported serious issues with negotiations, renewals, and timely payment.

Arts organizations repeatedly cited slow or unresponsive commu-

nications from the city, a lack of contract transparency, and undue delays that put pressure on teaching artists and the institutions that employ them.

Despite these challenges, teaching artists remain crucial to the future of arts in NYC. Since the 1970s, teaching artists have bridged the gap to serve lower-income and underfunded communities and fill the gaps across the city's 290 public schools that still lack a certified arts teacher.

The status quo isn't working for artists or students, and the city's inaction is exacerbating the arts access gap while hurting the New Yorkers who need public arts access most.

Thankfully, City Hall can change course. A new mayor committed to making this city more affordable, working alongside a City Council that has long championed the arts, can protect these artists and ensure they support our city's future for years.

The Council should start by strengthening protections so that teaching artists can continue to serve the New Yorkers who need

them without unnecessary delays. That means tightening timelines for support, providing consistent funding and contracting, and ensuring a more responsive partner in government.

But at a time when affordability is becoming further out of reach, lawmakers should also work to provide portable benefits to teaching artists and guarantee they have access to stable, consistent wages that allow them to stay here without being priced out.

New York City's arts opportunities are the envy of the world, encouraging creative professionals from across the globe to stay and contribute to our diverse heritage. But that reputation requires real investment to protect the teaching artists who improve our city and ensure they aren't pushed out by low pay, unreliable contracts, and rising cost of living.

As they look to fulfill the promise of a more affordable and livable New York, city leaders must act to ensure teaching artists are part of the picture.

*Olsen is the executive director of the NYC Arts in Education Roundtable.*