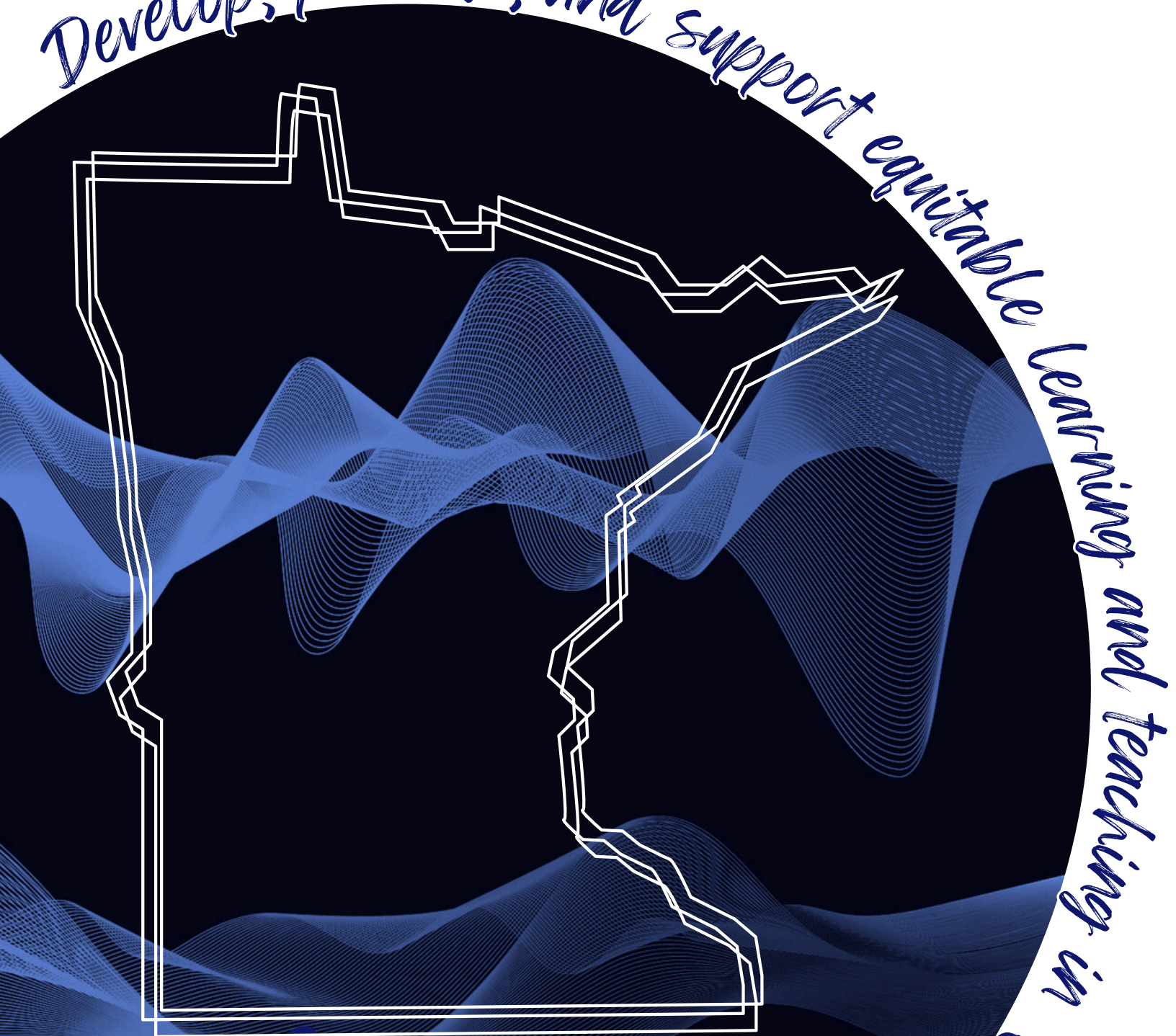


INTERVAL

DECEMBER 2024

Develop, promote, and support equitable learning and teaching in



Minnesota

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The Power of Community

From the Editor



**Dr. Sarah
Minette**

SMINETTE@MMEA.ORG

Welcome to the second issue of Interval, the official publication of the Minnesota Music Educators Association. We had an overwhelming response to our call for articles, many of which are session previews for the 2025 Midwinter Convention. The topics are vast and relevant to music education today, and tomorrow. This issue is organized by themes, and it is our hope that you will find inspiration from your colleagues to try something new in your classroom, or consider in your thinking about music education.

In keeping with the theme of this year's Midwinter Convention, "Harmony in Community," I have been contemplating how community is cultivated in the many classrooms that we occupy with our students. Many of us travel to multiple schools, while many of us have been in the same classroom for the majority of our careers. Some of us are brand new to teaching, and some of us are nearing the end of our career. Regardless of what kind of room we teach in, the geographic location of our school, or the kind of music that is experienced in our classrooms, we often find ourselves in a pursuit to create community with our students, and perhaps other teachers in the building, administration, and parents and caregivers.

In 1919, M.P. Follett wrote about community as a creative process. "[Community] is creative because it is a process of integrating. The creative power of the individual appears not when one 'wish' dominates others, but when all 'wishes' unite in a

working whole" (p. 576). Her use of 'wish' was in reference to a personal goal or intention, and the importance of collaboration towards a common goal within the community. She further emphasized that the process of creating was what actually creates community, in the same way that in music, the process of creating results in the product. And often, the process of creating is lost in the goal of obtaining the final product.

In a music classroom, dissonance might show up as differing viewpoints, conflicts of values, or challenges in communication; but when embraced and navigated thoughtfully, it can spark critical reflection and foster a stronger sense of collective purpose. These moments of discomfort can encourage dialogue, empathy, and create a better understanding of ourselves and others to create a richer, more nuanced harmony, where individuals don't merely conform to one another but learn to coexist and even thrive in the space between their differences. Through these meaningful, and oftentimes difficult experiences both teachers and students can continually learn from each other, evolving together as a musical community.

Reference:

Follet, M.P. (1919). Community is a process. *The Philosophical Review*, 28(6). 576-588.

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New *Beginnings*

By Michael Buck, PhD



A music educator for more than thirty years, Dr. Michael Buck has taught band, orchestra, classroom music, church choir, barbershop chorus and adult community choir. Currently, Dr. Buck serves as the Music Education Professional Development Specialist at the Perpich Center for Arts Education and Adjunct Associate Professor of Music at St. Olaf College. His K-12 teaching experience includes elementary, middle and high school positions in suburban Minneapolis and at two overseas American international schools. Dr. Buck holds degrees from St. Olaf College, VanderCook College and The University of Southern Mississippi.

As we begin another school year, I am reminded of the privilege and responsibility given to educators – shaping the hearts and minds of future generations of students. Especially in times of division and polarization, sharing our passion for music by creating purposeful and robust musical experiences, plays a crucial role in fostering joy, understanding, creativity, cooperation, belonging, and appreciation. Developing these 21st century skills rightly belong in our music classrooms. We are needed now, as much as ever!

While watching the Summer Olympics held in Paris, I was reminded of the power of music to stir the soul and bring people together. The celebratory performance of a national anthem during the award ceremony is much more than a pledge of allegiance to a geographic location. It is an expression of aspiration, accomplishment, culture, pride, understanding, and more—things that make us human.

Music is one of the most important expressions of our humanity. As I have traversed the state in the past months leading and participating in professional development events, I am truly inspired by the perseverance, dedication, curiosity, accomplishment, and enthusiasm of YOU, my music colleagues! May we find inspiration in each other to nobly continue our work, igniting the spark of wonderment and fostering the joy of musicing! Music matters!

RAISE YOUR VOICE

MUSIC ADVOCACY 101

“If we are only presenting highly polished performances on stage for spectators, we may unintentionally reinforce the elitist and disconnecting message that some of us are musicians and others are not.” -David Davis

You might be familiar with the federal grant “Title” programs that support students and schools in a range of areas. But did you know that Title I, II, and IV include financial support for music education?

As Minnesota’s State Captain for NAFME’s Hill Day at the Capitol this past June, I learned valuable advocacy information like this that can help our students. Armed with this knowledge, I met with the offices of Sen. Amy Klobuchar, Sen. Tina Smith, and Rep. Ilhan Omar to encourage Congress to fully fund these important programs, which could especially benefit the estimated 4 to 10 million children who currently lack access to music education in our nation’s schools.

However, not all advocacy needs to happen at the federal level. Advocacy for music education can also begin within our local districts and communities. And, if you’re like I was before Hill Day and unsure where to start, here are three key points I took away from NAFME’s advocate leadership training that could help get you started:



1. Be Well Informed

For example, I learned that the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015 significantly redefined what constitutes a “well-rounded education” in U.S. schools, explicitly including the word “music” for the first time. This not only underscores the importance of music alongside other subjects but also clarifies that schools can use federal funds to support music programs.

Your administrators may not realize this! In a program struggling with decrepit instruments or understaffing, connecting with the district administrator responsible for Title funding and using the appropriate Title program language could unlock access to federal financial support.

If you’re not familiar with the difference between the Title programs, [here is a brief summary from NafME](#). Additionally, knowledge of state statutes may support advocating for FTEs and music programs in your district. You can find a summary of state policies at Arts Education Partnership [here](#).

2. Know Your Audience

While we can all argue that music nourishes the soul, this assertion often resonates only with those who already agree. During Hill Day, I heard many stories about the necessity of tailoring our message to different politicians. Similarly, we should adapt our approach when speaking with parents, administrators, school board members, or local representatives to help them understand what we bring to the table. As one advocate put it, “We are more than just divas that put on a good show!”

One advocacy trainer, Mary Dell’Erba of the Education Commission of the States (ECS), informed us that the main points currently being discussed in education politics include:

- Educator workforce recruiting and retention
- Workforce development
- Literacy
- Physical and mental health
- S.T.E.A.M.

She also noted that employers are seeking skills in:

- Collaboration
- Problem solving
- Adaptability
- Persistence



Mary encouraged us to align our music advocacy message with these themes to make a more compelling case.

And - don’t forget to research your audience for any connections they might have to music education before meeting. Before visiting the offices of our Minnesota representatives, I researched them (and their staffers!) to find such connections. I had more productive conversations when I understood what they cared about, how the issue might affect their constituents, and their voting history on education bills.

3. Lead Through Community

Perhaps the most powerful form of advocacy doesn't include much talking at all. During the NAFME advocacy leadership training, Annie Ray, recipient of the 2024 GRAMMY Music Educator Award, emphasized that often the best way to advocate for music education is to involve people beyond the students. If we are only presenting highly polished performances on stage for spectators, we may unintentionally reinforce the elitist and disconnecting message that some of us are musicians and others are not.

Here are some community advocacy ideas I've found successful in my own curriculum:

- Invite families to perform alongside students in your ensembles;
- Inviting local musicians into your classroom;
- Have students perform or speak during school board meetings;
- Display posters of students' family members who are local musicians;
- Invite the mayor or your local representative to a school music event;
- Collaborate with your students to compose an [original song to honor](#) someone in their community.

By inviting your local community into participatory engagement, we can demonstrate that the arts are integral to the human experience—which in turn can translate into powerful community support for continued music education.

As educators, we see firsthand the impact of music education in our lives and our students' lives. So rather than shy away from advocacy, we must embrace it, raise our voices, and take action. If we don't stay informed, engage with policymakers, and involve our communities, music education may lose support in our schools and programs will shrink or disappear. Start by advocating locally, and then join me and advocates from across the country at NAFME's Hill Day next year to ensure that music education continues to receive the support and funding it deserves.



David Davis is a band, orchestra, and general music teacher in St. Louis Park, Minnesota, committed to music education reform. Recognized for his inclusive, culturally responsive, and student-centered teaching, he is one of 20 national teacher leaders in NAFME's Connected Arts Network, a 2023 GRAMMY Music Educator semifinalist, a Yamaha "40 Under 40" educator, and was a semifinalist for the 2021 Minnesota Teacher of the Year. Beyond the classroom, David serves as an MEA Racial Equity Advocate, and is also an accomplished saxophonist and active board member of MMEA and the Rock 'n' Read Project.

Minnesota State High School League Updates

Contest Adjudication

Sharing Your Expertise While Growing as An Educator

By Mark Gitch, MMEA Representative to the MSHSL

Minnesota is blessed with an abundance of highly qualified educators and musicians, but convincing enough of them to become certified adjudicators is an ongoing challenge. Region Managers are already seeking Large Group and Solo and Ensemble judges for winter and spring events, and those judges are, by and large, us—the members of MMEA.

Not only can judges make or break the contest experience for students and participating schools, being a judge affords active educators the opportunity to connect with other schools/directors and discover new repertoire. Retired educators have the opportunity to stay connected and help current students and programs thrive. The Minnesota State High School League and MMEA encourages music educators and other interested musicians to pursue certification so that adjudicated events are more likely to produce consistent, equitable, meaningful outcomes for students. In addition, the certification process ensures that managers are hiring judges who have completed an annual background check.

The MSHSL recently revised its online certification course to make it significantly more concise. New users can typically complete the entire registration process in under thirty minutes, with renewing judges needing even less time. A fee of \$15 is applied toward the cost of background checks. The names of certified adjudicators are shared with contest managers, however, completing certification does not guarantee being hired. [Link here to learn more about the certification process.](#)



“Directors are encouraged to prioritize the quality of their ensemble’s performance over the difficulty level of the repertoire selected.”

Revised Large Group Contest Required Repertoire Lists

Contest Bylaw 102.00 states that entries in Events 1-5 (“Major Performing Groups”) must perform a minimum of one selection from the Approved MSHSL Contest/Festival List. Other selections can also be taken from the list, but a single selection satisfies the requirement.

In 2021, an ad hoc group of band directors led by Paul Kile (Edina HS) reviewed and revised the existing list, which many felt was no longer adequately reflective of contemporary practices. New partnerships with ACDA-MN and MNSOTA soon led to similar work on the choral and orchestral lists. An MBDA working group led by Kevin Huseh (Cloquet HS) further refined the band list and developed a new repertoire proposal process. The new lists developed by ACDA-MN and MNSOTA will soon join the band list already posted on the [MSHSL’s new webpage for Large Group Contest Repertoire](#). These lists will be the official Bylaw 102 lists for the 2024-2025 school year. The revision of these lists has taken significant effort. Your patience as we finalize the choral and orchestral lists and work out kinks on our new processes is greatly appreciated.

The approved lists, which will continue to be managed in partnership with ACDA-MN, MBDA, and MNSOTA, are not intended to be comprehensive lists of all high-quality music. Rather, they are a limited set of pieces selected and categorized for use as one benchmark of an ensemble’s aptitude and/or aspirations. For many directors, it may also serve as the starting point for the selection of additional repertoire that further reflects the breadth and depth of their ensembles. As such, the League intends for these lists to be a valuable resource for early career directors as well as a source of inspiration for experienced directors.

While it’s difficult to draw clear lines, in general:

- Category I pieces represent the most challenging repertoire
- Category II pieces represent repertoire of moderate/intermediate challenge
- Category III pieces are the most accessible repertoire

The choice of one category or another is not a reflection or prediction of the quality with which an ensemble might perform, but rather an opportunity to benchmark the highest difficulty level at which a director feels their ensemble can perform in an accomplished manner. Directors are encouraged to prioritize the quality of their ensemble’s performance over the difficulty level of the repertoire selected, while also utilizing difficulty designations to stretch themselves and their ensembles appropriately. Categories are not tied to specific awards, additional points, or any other recognitions. **They are simply a tool for directors and a data point for the League and its constituents.**



Minnesota Music Contests

Then and Now

The Minnesota State High School Athletic Association was established in 1916 to promote amateur sports and establish uniform eligibility rules for interscholastic contests. It changed its name to the Minnesota State High School League in 1929 and expanded its scope to include all extant interscholastic activities, including speech and debate. Girls athletics were added in the 1960's. While various regional music festivals and contests existed, the first statewide music contest of record was held in 1925 under the auspices of the University of Minnesota Extension Service. In 1929, the faculty leading this outreach established a new Minnesota Public School Music League patterned on the governance structure of the MSHSL (Note: MMEA modeled its original regional structure similarly). The Music League, led for much of its existence by U of M professor of music Dr. Paul Oberg, would govern Minnesota's interscholastic music contests for the next thirty five years.

In 1947, at the request of the Music League, the MSHSL began supporting their musical counterparts with a small but gradually increasing flow of financial support. In 1965, following four years of discussion and planning, the Music League ceased operations and the MSHSL assumed the administration and supervision of interscholastic music contests in Minnesota. At that time, Murrae Freng (Choral, Alexandria) was hired by the MSHSL as an assistant with responsibility for fine arts activities, including music, speech, debate, and drama. Freng would go on to become the League's Executive Director (1970-1985). In 1971, Carl Lipke (Choral, North St. Paul) was hired as the League's Music Clinician. His responsibilities included certifying and assigning judges, leading the music approval committee, and hosting contest manager workshops. He held this position until his retirement in 2021. For his years of service, he was named to the MSHSL Hall of Fame (2009). Upon Lipke's retirement, responsibility for interscholastic music programming moved to the portfolio of MSHSL staff member Tim Leighton, in collaboration with the MSHSL's Music Advisory Committee, established in 2018. Administratively, this new staff plus advisory structure brought music in line with other activities supported by the MSHSL.

MSHSL records show that MMEA has provided representatives to their board since 1971:

Donald Gjerdrum, Burnsville, 1971-1972
Oscar Dahle, Mpls SW, 1973-1974
Ellwood Hoiseth, Park Center, 1975-77
Art Smith, Rosemount, 1977-79
Alan Raitor, Sauk Center, 1979-1983
Clinton Peterson, Tracy, 1983-1987
Richard Foley, Saint Frances, 1987-1991
Larry McCaghy, Lakeville, 1991-1995

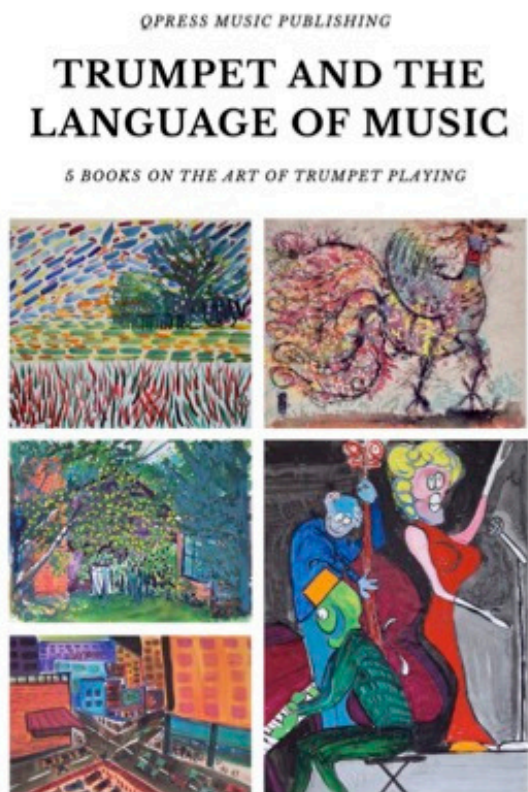
Peter Olson, Becker, 1995-1999
Steve Olson, Rosemount, 1999-2003
Eric Anderson, Cambridge-Isanti, 2003-2007
Bill Webb, Edina, 2007-2011
Lane Powell, Fillmore, 2011-2015
Eric Christenson, Shakopee, 2015-2019
Amanda Kaus, Rochester Century, 2019-2023
Mark Gitch, Wayzata, 2023-2027

The current Music Advisory Committee includes MSHSL staff members **Tim Leighton** (Communications Coordinator, Music Liaison) and **Laura Mackenthun** (Director of Information Systems), current MMEA Representative to the MSHSL **Mark Gitch** (Wayzata HS Orchestra), Orchestra representatives **Mary Gagnon**, (Park Center) and **Katie Hoaglund**; Choral/Vocal representatives **Stephanie Trump** (Robbinsdale Armstrong), **Jen Wieland** (Red Lake Falls) **Jerome Upton**, (Duluth, retired), **Daryl Timmer**, (Woodbury, retired), and **Jason Parker**, New London-Spicer; and Band representatives **Amanda Kaus** (Rochester Century), **Caitlin Becks** (New London-Spicer), **Tony Boldt** (Kasson-Mantorville), **Eric Christianson** (Shakopee), **Pete Gepson** (Glencoe-Silver Lake), **Dale Gunderson** (Grand Rapids), **Kevin Huseth** (Cloquet), **Aaron Isakson** (Concordia College - St. Paul, Christ's Household of Faith), **Brady Krusemark** (Mankato West), **Claire Larson** (Kenyon Wanamingo), **Rachel Moldan** (St. Mary's Sleepy Eye), **Burt Svendsen** (Rushford-Peterson, retired).

Many of the committee members are past or present MMEA officers, MNSOTA, ACDA-MN, or MBDA officers, MSHSL Region Representatives, and MSHSL Region Contest Managers.

Tidbits

- HS music teachers, particularly those who manage or participate in MSHSL contests, are encouraged to create a portal account on the League's website. The Music Advisory Committee hopes to use the portal directory to build out more effective direct communication with members. Go to <https://www.mshsl.org/>, click on "Log In," then create a new account.
- The September 2024 issue of the JRME included research titled Large Group Performance Evaluation in the United States. I encourage you to read the complete journal article linked [here](#) (NAfME login required), but I've provided what I hope is a reasonable summary of this interesting research [here](#), including annotations related to Minnesota's contests. This research is timely in light of our Music Advisory Committee's recent work on our contest policies and procedures.
- A MSHSL Open Forum will be held at the MMEA MWC on Thursday, 2/13/25 at 10:00 AM. Your questions and recommendations will be welcomed.



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individually or as a set from qPress.com



Inside

Midwinter Convention is just a few short months away, and we wanted to share with you some of the many [sessions](#) that will be available to attendees! For this issue we have divided sections based on thematic elements in the articles. This first section offers a general overview of the types of session you can expect: song sharing and learning in the elementary classroom; instrument repair techniques; rehearsal strategies and performances; and thought-provoking conversations. Make sure to click on the QR codes that will take you to fabulous videos!

Midwinter Preview



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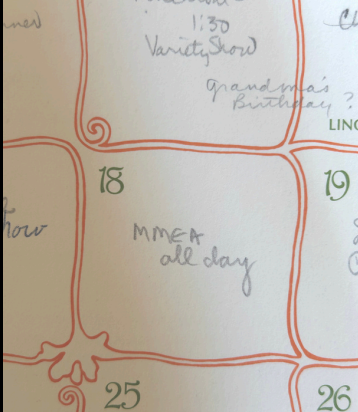
Message from MMEA's Convention Chair



DR. KAREN HOWARD
PRESIDENT ELECT

As we roll through the fall, we grow ever closer to the 2025 Midwinter Convention! Attending the convention has been a staple of my own winter professional development since I moved to Minnesota in 2014. Prior to moving here, I was a regular attendee at conventions in Washington and Connecticut. At MMEA's Convention, I have made new friends, learned from inspirational educators from our state and around the country, and had the opportunity to share my own work with our membership.

Recently, I had an up close and personal reminder of the long relationship between music educators and MMEA. My mother-in-law, Ruth Gaylord, recently passed away after a 25-year battle with ovarian cancer. She was a lifelong piano teacher, singer, and choral music educator throughout the Twin Cities Metro area for close to 60 years. While sorting through her vast collection of scores and pedagogical resources, we were paging through her planners. She kept each one that she ever used. While flipping through her planner from 1972, we landed on the pages for February. There, in her cursive script, was an important reminder:



We smiled and cried, picturing her gathering with friends and colleagues, surely singing, diligently taking notes at every session she attended, and then her probable excitement at incorporating some of the takeaways into her own teaching. It reinforced for me the importance of these opportunities to come together in community for inspiration and reinvigoration. I know that for some, getting the days approved to attend is difficult, even impossible. Please know that if I can help by writing an email or making a phone call to an administrator or other stakeholders, I am happy to do so!

Please be sure to join us at our Opening Session, what we have come to call **The WARMUP** on Thursday, 2/13 at 1:00! This is our chance to see friends new and old from across the state, to seek out first-time attendees, student teachers, and new teachers. We will honor our Teachers of the Year and will revel in the sounds of [jeremy messersmith](http://www.jeremymessersmith.com) (www.jeremymessersmith.com) as he performs with 5th graders from District 196 with their teacher Kate Culp, and the MacPhail North Youth Orchestra with their director Chi-Chi Bestmann.



I look forward to celebrating and musicking with you in February. Until then—We are MMEA.

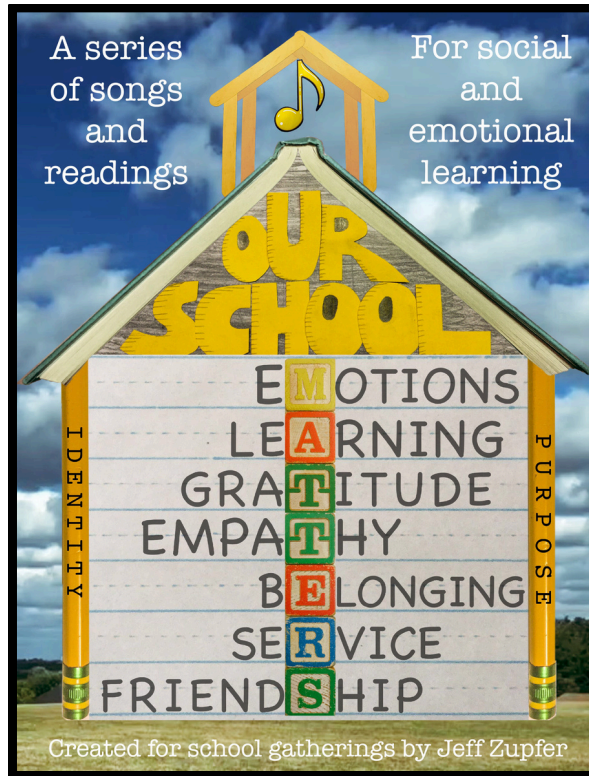
Karen Howard

Preview

Our School Matters

TED Talk with Mr. Jeff Zupfer

In this video **Jeff Zupfer** gives a brief description of [Our School Matters](#)—a series of songs and responsive readings for school gatherings centering around social/emotional learning. You will see how this series can be implemented in your school as well as receiving access to all the songs and responsive readings. Jeff has been teaching elementary music in Bloomington for 29 years and will be presenting a session at the MMEA Midwinter Convention in February 2025.



Video “Our School Matters”
(Pssst! The QR code is also a clickable hyperlink!)



Preview

Tips for adapting purchased oboe reeds

with Dr. Carrie Vecchione



Video “Tips for adapting purchased oboe reeds”
(Pssst! The QR code is also a clickable hyperlink!)



This video demonstrates a few tips for band directors who purchase oboe reeds. With some basic everyday materials you can try simple techniques to improve reeds that are difficult to play. You are invited to the session at MMEA’s Midwinter Convention about oboe reeds and how to play them on February 14, 2025 at 8:45 a.m. with Dr. Carrie Vecchione.

SUGGESTIONS FOR EFFECTIVE REHEARSAL/PERFORMANCE FOR THE UPPER-ELEMENTARY SCHOOL CHOIR

By Mr. Ernest Reineke

“It is imperative to program songs of different styles and genres that highlight composers of various identities and musical traditions.”



Ernest Reineke is currently in his 36th year of teaching choral music. He started his career as a K-8 band and vocal music teacher for the North Iowa Community Schools at Titonka, Iowa serving for two years. He taught for ten years in the Algona, Iowa Public Schools teaching K-12 vocal music and band lessons. He is currently in his twenty-fourth year in the Mason City, Iowa Community Schools. At Lincoln Intermediate School, Ernest is in charge of twenty sections of general music, directing four fifth grade choirs and two sixth grade choirs involving 375 choral students. A 1988 graduate of Northwestern College in Orange City, Iowa, he received his Bachelor of Arts degree in K-12 Vocal and Instrumental Music Education. In 1996, he was the first to receive his Master of Music degree from the University of Northern Iowa in Cedar Falls, Iowa from the Master of Music distance learning program primarily taught through the Iowa Communications Network (ICN).

On Thursday, February 13, 2025 during the Midwinter Convention, the Lincoln Singers and I will be presenting a session on “Creative Concert Programming for the Upper Elementary School Choir”. In tandem with the informance, this article is meant to augment that session with helpful suggestions from the *perspective of upper-elementary choir students*. I surveyed past singers, and these are their suggestions to make the choral experience even better!

Challenging music

One of the first things my former students wanted me to consider is how to program a concert with music that is challenging, combined with songs that are easier. As directors, we want our choirs to grow musically, but the singers also don’t want to be frustrated with music that is too difficult, creating an unbalanced experience. A teacher could consider singing a foreign language piece in unison making the text the focus and not necessarily part-singing; or partner songs with a descant to create three part singing.

Connect with the text

With lyrics being the vehicle for performance, it is important to understand the story that is being told, and then reinforce it. I have found that when I start by reading the lyrics of the song and treating it like a story, students get a better concept of what the song is trying to express. I then discuss the text with the students, and interpret the lyrics within the context of the music. This is also a great opportunity for us to integrate English/language arts.

Positive Praise

Students respond to positive praise. They want to do well for the adults in their life, and when they see that an adult is acknowledging them for their work, they try even harder. Sometimes rehearsing various sections of the music might not be that pretty, but the effort always is; and it is important that the choir understands how important their efforts are. Keep a positive attitude and always be patient. I start each rehearsal with at least two different compliments, such as “I really like how you came into the room quietly”, or “I really like how you found your folders without my assistance”. During rehearsals, students are constantly praised for what they are doing well, followed by a few pieces of constructive criticism, and then a return to positive praise. I end my rehearsals with three specific compliments so they feel good about how their rehearsal went, and they will feel good when they return to class.

Music History

Students enjoy learning about history through music. As educators, we took music history classes in college for a reason, so be an authority on the literature you are teaching. Make sure to include age-appropriate songs from various time periods. I try to program songs from various musical eras at least once per year and teach the students what made those musical eras special and unique. It is imperative to program songs of different styles and genres that highlight composers of various identities and musical traditions, and to highlight that effort so the students understand the importance of programming diverse composers.

Standing Arrangements

Choir is very social, and students enjoy singing with their friends. An effective way to mix up rehearsal is to try various standing and sitting arrangements for the choir, both in rehearsal and performance. Not every song is the most effective in a standard choral standing arrangement. I actually move students on stage, during a performance, in order to get the best sound from the choir. I typically have my sixth grade students sing in sections. This allows each group to hear the tone quality of those around them. This blending and movement creates friendships, allows for recognition of choral blend and tonal diversity among the ensemble. In performance I will have them sing in mixed formation. However, I will try to program one song in three parts, with the boys in their own section, to help them transition to the middle school level.

Be Aware of Time Commitments

My students remind me that they are very active outside of their music/school obligations. As educators, we are also balancing the expectations of work and personal life. I will be the first to admit that I can be very exhausted teaching general music classes, and then go to choir. But, I grab energy from a different well and go to my reserves. My inspiration comes from the teachers that I had in my past, and how they kept extremely busy schedules, but yet had time for all of their students, including me, to create a top quality program. Your students will thank you for the investment you are making in them by paying it forward.

In February, the Lincoln Singers will demonstrate many of these key concepts, plus a few surprises! I sincerely hope to see everyone who has read this article at the convention!

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Back to the H.E.A.R.T. with Angelica Cantanti Youth Choirs

By Beth Egger, Michelle Gehrz, and Ann Williams

Beth Egger, Michelle Gehrz, and Ann Williams have been leading choirs for a total of 99 years combined! They all share a big love for choral music, the voice, and bringing people together to make beautiful music. They've spent their careers helping singers of all ages grow their talent and sing as a group. With so much experience, they know how special it is when voices come together to create something amazing. They're excited to keep inspiring others and helping choirs feel the joy and connection that singing together brings. For more about these directors go to www.angelicacantanti.org



This February, join Angelica Cantanti Youth Choir singers and their directors Beth Egger, Michelle Gehrz, and Ann Williams for an engaging session on reconnecting with the H.E.A.R.T. of choral singing and teaching. We'll unpack strategies that we use with our choirs to instill a love of singing. Whether you're a new or experienced educator, you'll leave with a renewed perspective on why we do what we do—a deep love for our craft and for our singers.

H.E.A.R.T.

Harmony: Singers can learn how to sing harmonically through a variety of different strategies. Warm ups, rounds, ostinato patterns, partner songs, and thoughtfully written harmonic patterns can develop the singer's ear for harmonies. These strategies allow for singers to discover the satisfying experience of performing harmony.

Expression: Delve into the emotive power of the music. Take time in rehearsal to talk about lyrics and what they mean. Teach your singers how to convey their feelings and stories through song. Help guide them to a deeper understanding of what they are performing—help guide their hearts by leading them through a reflective process both pre- and post-performances.

Artistry: Heartfelt connections with the audience, through emotional depth and genuine expression, are what truly bring a song to life. Young artists can embody this by infusing each performance with authenticity and passion.

Resonance: Help your singers engage vocal resonance through meaningful activities! This playful approach will help them discover their own special sound and learn how to blend their voices with others. By exploring how the voice resonates within themselves and as part of a group, they'll create a richer and more heartfelt choir experience.

Teamwork: The choral ensemble is a shared experience where every voice is valued. Allowing the rehearsal time and space to teach the collaborative nature of choir will result in every singer feeling seen and heard. This approach will assist in eliminating barriers and allow for more heartfelt engagement.

We can't wait to see you at MMEA to connect and engage in this session as we bring these ideas to life.

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The Elephant in the Room

Preventing Sexual Misconduct in the Music Classroom

By Mackenzie Bufis and Patty Sampson

Content Warning: This article contains mentions of child sexual abuse, sexual assault, and abuses of power.

Let's be honest—this is not a comfortable topic. For some of us, the topic of sexual misconduct hits extremely close to home. Even if it hasn't affected us personally, the idea of children being sexually abused is hard to consider. As teachers who care about kids, it sickens us to think that anyone—much less a fellow educator—would abuse a child. Hearing about an incident can create anxiety about ourselves being falsely accused. Because these crimes are sexual in nature, it feels taboo to even speak about, for some. It is a topic so uncomfortable that many people find it easier to just

avoid it. In education, sexual misconduct has historically been “the elephant in the room,” a horrible stain on our profession that has been both subconsciously and intentionally ignored.

It's time to talk about The Elephant.

Every year, 1 in 10 students report being the targets of unwanted sexual attention from a teacher. (Jeglic et al, 2023) This means 4.5 million K-12 students are groomed and abused by teachers in the United States every year. This is beyond a rampant problem. If 4.5 million children were to get sick from tainted food in school cafeterias, the public would be outraged. And yet, we rarely discuss sexual abuse; we often don't even want to think about

it. Silence and secrecy have enabled sexual misconduct to thrive in this country, to the point where it seems like an overwhelming problem. It feels insurmountable. We feel hopeless.

But at The Elephant Alliance, we have hope. We know that armed with the right information, grooming is possible to detect. We offer strategies that teachers, support staff, administrators, and parents can use to create safe spaces where children are less likely to be abused. We believe that educator sexual misconduct is preventable.

In 2019, we had had enough and we founded the Elephant Alliance. Aside from our own first-hand experiences, it seemed like every music

teacher we knew could share a story (or 3) about music teachers abusing students. It was hard not to wonder: why do we hear about this so often? Do music teachers actually abuse kids more often than teachers in other subjects? Is there something about music teachers that makes them more susceptible to misconduct? And the question that haunted us most of all: Why isn't anyone talking to music teachers about this?

The search for these answers brought us together and set us on our mission to prevent educator sexual misconduct. We started by researching every published study and book we could find on this topic, in addition to conducting our own study in Illinois. We then began interviewing law enforcement, child advocates, school administrators, Title IX coordinators, and survivors of educator sexual misconduct to help us create the most thorough and useful professional development sessions possible. Since 2019, we have talked to teachers, college students, administrators, and police officers in 13 states and several international conferences.

Our organization's name reflects our goal of addressing "the elephant in the room," but we also take inspiration from the behaviors of actual elephants. In the wild, elephants are fierce protectors of their herd. Elephants will encircle their most vulnerable members to protect them from predators. They kick up dust, bare their tusks, and create a protective shield. We are here to do the same: to protect our most vulnerable members of society and to kick up dust until everyone gets in formation.

When we speak to educators and other special interest groups, we arm adults with the information they need to protect kids. Without the correct information, people are limited by their misconceptions. Misconceptions about how predators think, and who exactly is capable of abusing children; misconceptions about what grooming actually looks like; and misconceptions about how kids behave when under the control of an abuser. These limiting beliefs are incredibly dangerous and they essentially guarantee that we will miss the warning signs of grooming and abuse.

As teachers who care about our students, we cannot afford to miss these warning signs. The consequences are too devastating. It is our responsibility as a profession to address the issue of sexual misconduct, and The Elephant Alliance is extremely grateful to collaborate with MMEA in this mission. There are two sessions on the agenda at the MMEA Midwinter Convention in Minneapolis that we sincerely hope you can attend. The first is titled "The Elephant in the Room: Sexual Misconduct in Music Education." This session – Thursday, February 13 at 5pm – can be considered an overview of the topic: We'll be talking about the scope and scale of the problem, the psychopathy of predatory teachers, and the grooming process. The second session, "The Elephant in the Room: Building a Culture of Safety," is on Friday, February 14 at 3:30pm. We will focus on solutions and further explore grooming, discuss how to detect it and how to handle it. We will talk about strategies that you can implement right away in your classrooms, ensembles, and programs to keep kids safe. In both sessions, we will not just be talking about abuse as an abstract concept, we will dig into the realities and tackle specific situations that you may face as an educator.

Some teachers suffer from the "not in my school" fallacy and believe this information doesn't apply to them because sexual abuse will never occur at their school. Other teachers know that they aren't sex offenders, and therefore feel this information isn't applicable. And of course, it's more comfortable to attend a typical session or "network" at Brit's than to sit through sessions on sex abuse. We understand there are many reasons one might be hesitant to attend a session on sexual misconduct, but we assure you: we are not slinging mud, and this is not a "gotcha" session to make you feel defensive. This is a session that will provide you with research-based strategies to help prevent grooming and abuse. We promise to handle these sessions with the utmost care and sensitivity.

We appreciate the opportunity to present at the upcoming Midwinter Convention. We hope that through our sessions and conversations at the conference, you will be better equipped to protect students. Please join us in preventing sexual misconduct.

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Mackenzie Bufis taught band/orchestra in Downers Grove, (IL) District 58. She has written and presented sessions on sexual misconduct prevention at conferences across the country, including the Crimes Against Children Conference in Texas and the Midwest Clinic. Mrs. Bufis earned her degree in Music Education from the University of Illinois.

Patty Sampson earned her undergraduate degree from DePaul and a Master's in Music Education from Northwestern University. She has recently retired as the Director of Bands at West Aurora HS. Miss Sampson is a frequent adjudicator and clinician in the Chicago area, and was a 2017 Grammy Quarterfinalist and Kane County Teacher of the Year in 2022.



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2025 MMEA Midwinter Convention

Harmony

in COMMUNITY

Inside

As the North Star State, Minnesota has been a place of pride for looking towards the future and pushing and breaking down boundaries in music education. The articles in this section offer contemplations in the ways in which we continue to be a guide for other states in music education. Additionally, we can consider how we continue to grow in our own practices as music educators in Minnesota.



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Building Towards the Future

By Jamie Andrews



Jamie Andrews (he/him) has over two decades of experience working in the arts, education, and nonprofit administration. He is currently the Executive Director of the American Choral Directors Association of Minnesota and a founding member of PrimeLife Arts Learning, an online platform dedicated to Creative Aging. Previously, he served as Development Manager for Lakeshore Players Theatre, as Recruitment and Events Planning Liaison at the University of St. Thomas, and as the Chief Learning Officer at the Minnesota Opera. In this position, he oversaw an extensive array of programs for all ages, including an industry-leading Creative Aging initiative, Music Out Loud, the first opera-based El Sistema-inspired youth program in the US, and the commission of a youth opera, The Song Poet, based on the novel by Kao Kalia Yang with music by Jocelyn Hagen. Active in arts advocacy, Jamie has served on the board of Minnesota Citizens for the Arts.

Jamie started his career in the arts, teaching band and choir in Forest Lake and Lester Prairie, Minnesota, after earning a bachelor's degree in Music Education from the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire. He also earned a master's degree in Arts and Cultural Management from St. Mary's University of Minnesota.

*"To be truly visionary, we have to root our imaginations in our concrete reality while simultaneously imagining possibilities beyond that reality."
- bell hooks*



ACDA-MN has a remarkable history of supporting choral music in Minnesota. From events like the State Conference and Summer Dialogue, to the state Honor Choirs for students in grades 4-10, publishing the [Star of the North e-magazine](#), providing scholarship support, and countless other learning and performing opportunities, this organization regularly demonstrates its mission to support and inspire choral musicians throughout the state. I have been the Executive Director for three years, and I am continually amazed by the depth and breadth of activity this organization does. And that is even with 25+ years working in arts education administration!

However, even with this successful track record, ACDA-MN recognizes that we are in the midst of significant changes occurring in our field, culture, and society in general. As just about every educator sees regularly, the students who are entering our classrooms are experiencing a different world than students from even a generation ago.

- We are rapidly [diversifying](#).
- We are living longer and more active lives. [Life expectancy](#) in the US is 77.5 years for someone born in 2022. (What is also curious about 2045 is that it is the year millennials turn 65.)
- College enrollment is expected to [decline](#).
- And, once people graduate college, the low pay, isolation, and lack of professional development are factors causing early career educators to [leave the profession](#).

But even with the challenges that lay ahead, ACDA-MN recognizes these changes as opportunities for the arts and education. In particular, the following three areas are finding notable success.



IDEA Fund

The Inclusion, Diversity, Equity, and Accessibility (IDEA) Fund is a grant program launched in 2022 to support research and development for creating more access and inclusion in choir. Creating change can look different from choir to choir and director to director, and new ideas need application to be fully realized. The funding parameters are intentionally broad to be inclusive of the diversity where choir can appear.

The fund has already supported programs such as the creation of the BridgeSingers, a [Threshold Choir](#). This is part of an international movement whose mission is to “sing for those at the thresholds of life.” It is intensely personal art-making for people who are often close to passing away. The impact of this work is significant. Participating singers described the experience as, “This is such a cultural need - but we’re disconnected and at a loss for how to ask for it,” and, “I feel like more of a human when I leave than when I arrived.” Family members of the recipients describe, “I didn’t know what to expect, and I was nervous - but the energy of all your voices together was so relaxing.”

Another example of the IDEA Fund in action is the creation of a Glee Choir for singers with special needs. Offered by Angelica Cantanti, goals include building singer self-esteem and pride, improving emotional well-being, and sharing music-making with others by making new friends and building community.

Choral Mentorship Program (CMP)

Started in 2022 with IDEA Funds, this mentoring program pairs experienced educators with early-career choir directors. The support the program offers to the mentees includes health and well-being, combat isolation, and continued professional development. Two intended outcomes of the program are: 1) New choral conductors will learn to thrive in their working environment with the guidance and support of the mentor, and 2) Mentor/mentee will establish a close professional relationship built on positive feedback and reflection of best practice. To further program growth, we recognize the need to build stronger relationships with potential mentees, school administrators, and university music education programs. Currently, 40 early and mid-career choir directors are participating in the program.



Creative Aging

When advocating for arts education in schools, a range of statistics are offered about the benefits of music making, such as playing an instrument or singing improves the health and well-being of the musician, or that music participation fosters teamwork and collaboration, and offers a means of connection to school for some students. Yet those benefits do not stop once you graduate high school or college. In fact, the skills and emotional fulfillment developed through arts participation continue to enrich our lives long after formal education ends. The need for connection and creative expression lasts throughout our lives. [Lifetime Arts](#) suggests, “As Americans are living longer and healthier lives, researchers have discovered that the aging brain is far more plastic than previously believed, and that structured learning — especially through the arts — can improve cognitive functioning and enhance the quality of life.”

[Creative Aging](#) is defined as “the practice of engaging older adults (55+) in participatory, professionally run arts programs with a focus on social engagement and skills mastery.” ACDA-MN is just getting started in this fast-growing movement. Questions we are considering include what does life-long learning look like for someone who lives to 80, 90, 100+? What sort of pedagogy or methodology look like in this context? Early steps we have taken include offering conference sessions on Creative Aging, including a performance by Giving Voice, the choir for people suffering from dementia and their caregivers.

We are bullish on the future. Choir brings people together. By actively responding to the challenges and opportunities presented by a changing world, ACDA-MN is doing more than preserving the choral tradition—it's expanding it. It reminds us that while the landscape may shift, the human need to express, connect, and belong through music is timeless. This visionary approach ensures that ACDA-MN remains relevant, responsive, and ready to embrace the future of choral music in Minnesota and beyond.



INTRODUCING MINNESOTA'S CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE ARTS EDUCATION (CRAE) ACTION AND LEARNING PROGRAM

By Casey Clementson, David Davis, and Sophia Butler

Exciting changes are happening in music classrooms across Minnesota! Twenty-four music educators have been selected to participate in the Culturally Responsive Arts Education (CRAE) Action and Learning Program, led by the Minnesota Department of Education's Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Center*. Funded by a U.S. Department of Education Assistance for Arts Education grant, this initiative aims to foster collaboration among arts educators to enhance equity in our music classrooms.

Music teacher participants hail from all over the state, including Austin, Cass Lake Bena, Cloquet, Columbia Heights, Fairmont, Lakes International Academy, Minneapolis Public Schools, North St. Paul-Maplewood-Oakdale, Rosemount-Apple Valley-Eagan, St. Cloud, and St. Louis Park.

During the program's first year, we learned about culturally responsive teaching while examining biases and existing systems that perpetuate racism and inequity in arts education. We applied these concepts to our own teaching environments, focusing on how to promote equity and create music classrooms where every student experiences belonging and joy. A key highlight was our study of Dr. Amy Kraehe's Six Principles of Arts Equity—distribution, participation, access, recognition, transformation, and effects—which deepened our understanding of equity in practice.

We also learned from guest artists such as Akiko Ostlund, Melodee Strong, T. Mychael Rambo, Michael Kleber-Diggs, and Anat Shinar who led workshops in collage, songwriting, poetry, and dance. They shared how art can be a powerful tool for inclusion and understanding.

Now in our second year, after identifying inequitable practices within our classrooms and districts, we have begun developing Pilot Action Initiatives to implement this school year. These initiatives range from curricular changes, instructional strategies, improving student experiences, and revising policies and systems.

Through this program, our state is a leader and role model in advancing culturally responsive arts education, setting an example for how education systems can enact meaningful, systemic change. Let's continue to share ideas and work together to enact lasting change for our students, schools, and communities!

The Minnesota Music Educators Association (MMEA) invites all members of the CRAE Action and Learning Program to share their stories and initiative updates in the spring publication of *The Interval* by April 15 using this [link](#).

*The program participants also include 34 Visual Arts teachers, 1 Theatre teacher, and 4 School/District Arts Leaders

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THE MUSIC EDUCATOR TODAY AND TOMORROW

By Dr. Adrian Davis



“I believe that there must be a full acknowledgement that the profession is **education, first.**”



Dr. Adrian Davis is an Assistant Professor of Music Education at the University of Minnesota, and the director of the University of Minnesota Gospel Choir. His research interests center around various facets of equity, racial and gender diversity, and spanning boundaries in music education through curriculum, pedagogy, policy, and spaces. He is the Performing Arts Coordinator for Saint Paul Public Schools. He served as president of the Minnesota Music Educators Association, and is a member of the Equity Committee for NAFME. Throughout his career in education, primarily in K-12, he has specialized in instrumental, choral, and music production. He is an active musician and producer, and owns Divers Music, a music production company which he founded in 2008.

Defining something from my perspective is more about making meaning of or in a situation. When I make meaning of something, it must involve my whoness, meaning a personal awareness of my own identity, aligned with experiences that are influenced and impacted by my core beliefs. It is who I am. I am a Black man and my village travels with me everywhere I go. That is my way of knowing and being. No one can define anything for you. You must define it for yourself. However, I am happy to describe some ideas for you that may resonate.

Consider the situation: being a music educator. I believe that there must be a full acknowledgement that the profession is **education, first.** There is an inherent silo or armory that comes along with music education. However, you must always remember that especially in school music education, you are part of a whole. You must advocate for your content area, while finding ways to connect with other content areas (STEM, social studies, language arts, etc.). You are *always* fighting for relevance, validation, and funding. This has historically been the case for music education in the United States since the days of the Space Race in the 1950s, A Nation at Risk in the 1980s, The No Child Left Behind Act in the 2000s, and it will continue to be a similar fight in the foreseeable future (Heuschele, 2022; Richerme, 2012; Simpson et. al, 2004). I describe education as a conscious and active drawing out of a wide range of information from a learner that has subconsciously existed all the time. Music is simply the medium that we utilize to draw that information out. We are MORE than music educators. We educate *through* music.

How could/should education through music happen? From my perspective, there must be an acknowledgement that the system of education in the United States was designed and continues to multidimensionally function in ways that resist change, while oppressing and sorting humans. Being an educator today means not being satisfied with interruption or surfacy awareness. A music educator must be disruptive or critically conscious in addressing and/or dismantling curriculum, pedagogy, policy, and spaces that continue to reproduce racism, sexism, classism. Those latter three categories in the United States have been historically utilized to sort people (Rothenberg, 2023; Love, 2019). There must be space for counterknowledge and counternarratives in school music programs. The system is not broken. It *is* working for how and for who it was originally designed: To support the agenda and needs of White, heterosexual, Protestant, males-first, and in some cases, only. I recommend reading the [NAfME Blueprint for Strengthening the Teacher Profession](#) addresses many ways of disrupting the supremacist agenda. Many facets within the Blueprint also highlight a greater connection between music education and the music industry, because they are one and the same.

As an educator of music, building career capital is important. These are skills, connections, and other resources that increase a person's viability in the job market. Having relevant and active skills in performance and technology is a must. Keep singing. Keep playing. Learn the basic functions of a Digital Audio Workstation (DAW). Learn how to DJ, or make a podcast, or an audiobook, or a movie trailer. Why? Because that is what many of our students in today's generation see and want to do. Today's learner wants to see you do it at a high level before they try. You must be a relevant model. The so-called traditional path to a music teacher career has changed. An educator of music must provide curriculum and pedagogy for learners to create their *own* path, perhaps an individualized education plan—one that meets a learner's individual needs, and avoids school from becoming an obedience school or a factory of compliance. Concerns in music education have rested for many years around gatekeepers, but music educators should also be mindful not to be a *gate creator*, reproducing violent socioacademic inequities that harm already underrepresented populations.

The so-called traditional path is still viable; however, in what is now the third decade of the twenty-first century, an educator of music must be able to market and promote their programs. Your great music product must demonstrate and amplify the process for the learner and the teacher. Within that process, develop a live product accompanied by data that show student achievement in and through arts with curriculum and pedagogy at all levels intentionally promoting positive and healthy racial diversity, gender diversity, and neurodiversity (Bowen & Kisida; 2023; Young, 2023). Marketing/promotion, balance of process/product, data that show achievement and DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion) impact is the three-legged stool for the current and future music educator: If you are missing any legs from that stool, what will happen? The stool will fall.

Always update and upgrade yourself. Remember, you are an educator, who teaches music. Malcolm X (1964) said "Education is the passport to the future. Tomorrow is for those who plan for it today."

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More

Tools and Technology

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to Increase Engagement and Efficiency in a Large Group Ensemble Rehearsal

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A Modern Approach to Teaching Elementary General Music



The way in which we approach learning and teaching is not static and should evolve with our personal experience. How we respond to student learning should also evolve through the curriculum that we choose, and how we choose to guide the learning process. These articles provide them. Technology is here to stay and there are many ways in which to incorporate technologies into all classrooms, from PreK-collegiate. Reid Wixon and Dr. Mary Birkner provide two examples of how various forms of technology can be used to enhance the learning process. As you are reading through these articles, consider what other technology may be available to you that can support student music learning experiences. Thoughtful approaches to a variety of ways in which we can teach, but also offer constructive feedback for student learning.

Using an iPad to Increase

Engagement and Efficiency

in a Large Group Ensemble Rehearsal

By Reid Wixson



Video by Reid Wixson
Minneapolis Southwest High School
(Pssst! The QR code is also a
clickable hyperlink!)

My name is Reid Wixson and this year (Fall 2024) I started using an iPad to help run rehearsals more effectively in our classroom. Watch the video to find out what I have learned and the ways I have found it to be an effective tool!

Pre iPad, I used my computer to display the rehearsal plan on the television with an HDMI cord directly connecting the laptop. This made it cumbersome to take attendance (I did not ever want to show personal data on the screen) and since my computer lived on my desk, I would have to take time to play a video or advance the slide.

Watch the video to learn more about how life with an iPad has helped our classroom.

Hardware Used:

Samsung 85" TV
iPad Air 13"
Yamaha Stereo system

iPad Apps Used:

Google Slides
ForScore - <https://forscore.co/>
Tonal Energy - <https://www.tonalenergy.com/>
Google Drive

Hardware Set Up:

TV mounted on the wall > connected with digital audio cable to > Yamaha Stereo System
iPad uses AirPlay to connect wirelessly to the TV

**To generate PDF versions of scores that are in paper format, I use Google Drive. You can directly create PDFs in the google drive app and add that instantly to your ForScore folder. I use the camera directly in the iPad right in the Google Drive app which allows me to have it permanently archived. When you take the picture directly using the Google Drive app it automatically frames the music with a great resolution and aspect ratio.

Exploring MusicFirst Elementary:

A Modern Approach to Teaching Elementary General Music

By Dr. Mary Birkner



“Perhaps the most exciting feature is the fact that MusicFirst Elementary is a living, breathing, curriculum that is continually being updated with new resources, new music, and new projects for student learning.”

Gone are the days you spent rifling through heavy stacks of textbooks to lesson plan for your elementary general music classrooms. Gone are the days when your littlest students struggled to find the right page number in their music textbooks! MusicFirst Elementary, powered by Charanga, is new on the scene, and this general music curriculum provides a multitude of lesson activities, beautifully scored music, and carefully curated resources that are easy to use in a variety of creative ways.



Dr. Mary Birkner is currently Curriculum Advisor for music curriculum company, Charanga, where she has had the pleasure of helping develop music curricula for general elementary music classes. Dr. Birkner has also served as Adjunct Assistant Professor in the School of Music at the University of Florida where she has worked in a variety of capacities. While at UF, Dr. Birkner has taught undergraduate and graduate courses including Instructional Design in Music Education, American Vernacular Music, Historical and Philosophical Foundations of Music Education, Musics of the World, Woodwind Skills, Flute Studio, and has directed the University of Florida Flute Ensemble. During the 2019-2020 and 2012-2013 school years, she served as Adjunct Assistant Professor of Flute at UF. She continues to serve as an advisor for graduate students in the UF online Masters in Music Education program.

Prior to her time at the University of Florida, she taught general music for grades K-5 in Michigan, grades K-2 in Texas, choir for grades 5-6 in Texas, and preschool music in Florida. Dr. Birkner holds a Ph.D. in music education from the University of Florida, a Master of Music in flute performance from the University of Florida, and a Bachelor of Arts degree from Denison University with a double major in music and education. She is pleased to have performed as flutist with the Ocala Symphony Orchestra for over fifteen years.

Singing and Active Music Making are at the Heart of this Curriculum!

Designed around the National Core Arts standards, the spiral design of this curriculum promotes active music making in every unit of work. As students learn about the elements of music, they will sing, play instruments, improvise, compose, listen and respond, and perform music in a variety of styles and genres.

As an educator, I always found teaching improvisation and composition a bit intimidating—but this engaging curriculum has activities such as these woven throughout every grade level with age appropriate parameters in place to let students explore and create within boundaries that expand and change as students grow.

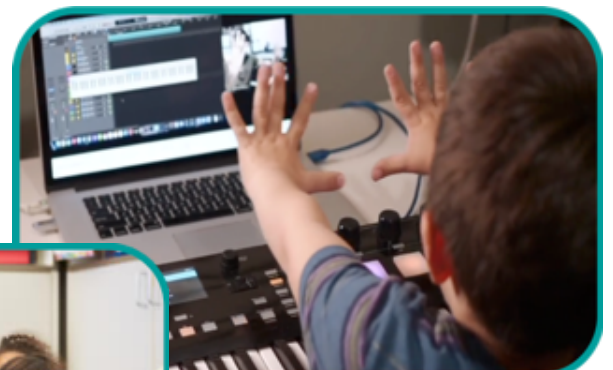
In addition to classroom instrument sections, you will also find sheet music for most any band and orchestral instrument beginning in third grade. Imagine the excitement of students who happen to take private saxophone, violin, or flute lessons when told they can bring their instrument to music class and play along with the music they are singing and learning at school! This is just one example of the many scaffolded activities you will find in MusicFirst Elementary.

Experience Using High Quality Technology at its Finest!

Music teaching and learning resources have certainly come a long way over the past few years. I find that my own children are perhaps more adept at navigating technology than I am, but this cloud-based system is user friendly – even for someone who may struggle with or feel intimidated by technology.

With easy clicking, MusicFirst Elementary functions almost like an interactive textbook and lesson planning platform. It can be used in several ways: in a traditional classroom setting, with the teacher as a guide at the front of the room, for small groups at stations, for small group projects, for 1:1 learning with a device, or even for students learning at home. There is a password-protected online space that can be used for students to learn, play, and develop their musicianship. Teachers can share their favorite materials and resources with students, set assignments, and track their engagement and progress.

In addition to the general music curriculum, you can access six Creative Tools that allow students to further practice their composition skills, music reading skills, or create music with graphic scores and iconic notation. YOU get to decide how the technology best supports your strengths as a teacher and best meets the needs of YOUR students.



Flexibility for Many Teaching Scenarios!

Teaching music is certainly not a “one size fits all” experience! How often, and how long, you see your students during the school year plays a major factor in lesson planning and pacing. MusicFirst Elementary provides a flexible platform that can accommodate a variety of scenarios.

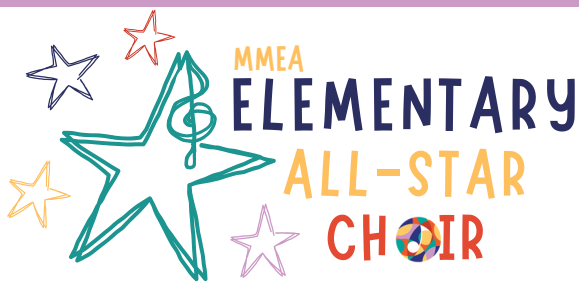
Within every unit of work, there are always many options for shortening or lengthening lessons, extending lessons by incorporating one of six Creative Tools, or adding occasional cross-curricular activities. Ready-made lesson plans and curriculum maps are easy to access, but the platform also allows you to build your own units and lessons, import your own materials, and even assign projects of your choosing to students.

The given units of work are easily adaptable to fit a variety of schedules. Teachers can pick and choose songs from many genres and styles, use pre-designed or personally-designed lesson material, and explore using any of the Creative Tools that best support their teaching scenario. Assessment tactics are also flexible with many options to assess on both a formative and summative basis. The intuitive design of MusicFirst Elementary allows teachers to make creative decisions that best meet the needs of their students.

There is Something for Everyone in MusicFirst Elementary!

Maybe you are an experienced teacher looking for something fresh and exciting. Perhaps you are new to teaching and are building your toolbox of lesson material and resources. Perhaps you are looking for new repertoire, interactive projects, games, or innovative ways to present material. No matter your situation, MusicFirst Elementary has something for everyone. You will find a variety of Orff and Kodály resources, interactive games, beautifully scored music, ukulele and recorder materials, musical productions, and even a kid-friendly DAW that your students can use to create music, score movies, or just explore sound.

Perhaps the most exciting feature is the fact that MusicFirst Elementary is a living, breathing, curriculum that is continually being updated with new resources, new music, and new projects for student learning. Because of this, the material does not run the risk of becoming stale, but grows in an organic way to reflect the needs of teachers, students, and the changing times of our modern world. The material gives students a chance to connect with music by immersing themselves in active music making, and by exploring historical and cultural influences for many styles of music. This new and exciting approach to teaching general music might be just what your classroom needs!



Performing at Midwinter
Convention 2025 with
Dr. Angela Kasper!



MMEA is excited to support elementary programs state-wide with the opportunity to experience esteemed music educator Dr. Angela Kasper. The Elementary All-Star Choir was created to provide elementary music students throughout Minnesota with a learning and performance opportunity at the annual Midwinter Convention. Join us on Saturday February 15th for the Elementary All-Star Choir Concert! The concert is free and open to the public. This opportunity is brought to us by University of St. Thomas and Schmitt Music.



More

The way in which we approach learning and teaching is not static and should evolve with our personal experience. How we respond to student learning should also evolve through the curriculum that we choose, and how we choose to guide the learning process. These articles provide thoughtful approaches to a variety of ways in which we can teach, but also offer constructive feedback for student learning.



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Looking Beyond the *Repertoire*

A Different Approach to Recorders

By Erin Elliott

Erin Elliott has taught since 2008 and is currently a K-5 elementary music teacher in the Penn-Harris-Madison School Corporation in Mishawaka, IN and the teacher-author behind *From Do-Re-Mi To You*. With over a decade of teaching experience from kindergarten through college, Erin strives to spark creativity and joy while laying a solid musical foundation in every student. Erin received her B.M.E. from the College of Wooster, a Music Certificate in Oboe from Bowling Green State University, and her M.M.E. from the University of Louisville. She has also completed all three levels of Orff training through the University of Cincinnati Conservatory of Music.



“I began to focus on encouraging students to explore beyond the notes on the page by asking, ‘What next?’”

Teaching recorders has been a passion of mine for many years. My enthusiasm for the instrument extends beyond the classroom as I also perform in a recorder consort during the winter season, Renaissance costumes and all. This passion translated into my teaching, where I developed a rigorous curriculum that produced strong performers, but with an emphasis on constantly testing repertoire.

Over the years, I began to realize the limitations of my approach. While many students thrived, others struggled with frustration, burnout, and disengagement. I realized that I had unintentionally shifted away from the joyful, creative elements of recorder playing that I had embraced during my Orff training, such as improvisation, exploration, and broader musical integration.

The pressure of this self-created high-stakes assessment led me to prioritize repertoire at the expense of musicianship. I was essentially “teaching to the test” rather than nurturing musicianship. The Covid-19 pandemic was an unexpected opportunity to step away from recorders for a couple years and to self-reflect on my approach to recorders. While mastery of repertoire

remains important, I decided to reshape my approach and am committed to using recorders as a versatile tool to engage students, enrich my entire curriculum, and foster a more inclusive, creative learning environment.

Children's Literature

Children's literature offers a natural way to integrate musical concepts and standards. Picture books, combined with chants, songs, and instruments, create rich opportunities for cross-disciplinary learning, and this approach can seamlessly extend to recorder instruction. One effective early lesson involves using *The Napping House* by Audrey Wood.

With beginners who have only learned the notes G and E by rote, we translate the repeated phrase, "where everyone is sleeping," into a simple Sol-Mi melody collaboratively designed by the class. From there, the story transforms into a performance piece, with students selecting instruments for sound effects, adding a simple bordun to accompany the melody, and other students acting out the narrative.

This activity not only provides confidence-boosting success for new recorder players, but also fosters engagement and creativity. Inviting a young class as an audience further enhances the lesson, allowing students to take pride in their playing and performance, and getting the younger students excited as to what is to come. By adapting familiar stories to include recorder elements, educators can enrich lessons with composition, improvisation, and ensemble playing, creating a dynamic learning environment.

Let's Improvise!

This time, improvise a melody for the A sections. Whatever you do the first measure should be repeated in measures 2 & 4!

The worksheet shows two musical staves in 4/4 time. The first staff has a treble clef and a key signature of one flat. It contains two measures of music, each with a yellow highlight. The notes are G4, A4, B4, A4, G4. To the right of the staff are the letters B, A, G. The second staff also has a treble clef and a key signature of one flat. It contains two measures of music, each with a yellow highlight. The notes are G4, A4, B4, A4, G4. To the right of the staff is the letter E.

Composition and Improvisation

As educators, fostering higher-order thinking is a key objective. Bloom's Taxonomy provides a useful framework, placing improvisation and composition at the top at Create (formally Synthesis), as these tasks require students to synthesize knowledge from various concepts to generate something new.

Before introducing these complex tasks on the recorder, it is essential to consider students' prior experiences with composition and improvisation. Asking them to engage in higher-order thinking without foundational skills can lead to frustration. To begin, start by developing their abilities through body percussion improvisation, rhythmic ostinato compositions, and simple xylophone compositions using familiar solfege pitches.

Many students hesitate to compose or improvise, just as they might struggle with creative writing in the classroom. Visual aids such as pitch stacks and structured phrase lengths can guide their improvisational exploration. For composition, offering a framework, such as providing the rhythm and starting/ending notes, can build confidence. Composing with note names first before transferring to the staff can also simplify the process.



Lastly, just as in writing, students need to evaluate and revise their work. Encouraging them to refine their compositions ensures that their pieces are both playable and musically engaging.



Centers

Over the past decade, centers have become a prevalent tool in elementary education, offering students opportunities for individualized practice and self-guided exploration. In elementary music, centers can be particularly effective for skill development and assessment. One of my preferred center activities involves two-beat composition cards with note names provided below, allowing students to compose melodies of varying length and complexity and perform them together. This activity can be further scaffolded by introducing elemental rhythm forms or requiring specific beginning and ending notes.

Another key advantage of using centers is the opportunity for individual assessment. In my larger classes of 30-35 students, it is challenging to assess students during full-group instruction. Centers offer a solution, enabling me to listen to students briefly one-on-one, provide immediate feedback, and identify areas in need of improvement. This personalized attention helps ensure that each student receives the support they need to progress at their own pace.

But What About the Repertoire?

As music educators, we face the challenge of limited instructional time. Balancing repertoire with creative exploration can seem daunting. However, I believe that many of the strategies discussed can be integrated into the process of teaching repertoire.

The Covid-19 pandemic provided an opportunity for reflection on my teaching approach. I realized that while assessment is essential for tracking progress, I wanted to move away from teaching songs solely for the purpose of “checking them off.” Instead, I began to focus on encouraging students to explore beyond the notes on the page by asking, “What next?”

For example, when my 4th graders learn the four measure song Old Mrs. Witch, we use improvisation and soundscapes to transform it into a Halloween performance piece. Playing We are Dancing in the Forest brings back memories of the singing game from 1st grade, and students eagerly request to revisit it, which we do! While my students enjoy learning Hot Cross Buns, they find even greater enjoyment in improvising their own melodies within the rhythmic framework of the song.

Teaching the recorder should be an engaging, creative, and joyful experience, even if it gets a bit noisy. Despite its bad rap amongst parents, the recorder is a powerful tool in the music classroom. By encouraging students to look beyond the black ink of the page, we can foster a deeper connection to music and creative thinking. The question to ask is not, “What song is next on the list?” but “What else can we do with this music?”

“GAME ON”

IN YOUR CONCERT BAND WARM-UPS!

By Dr. Ward Miller

I'm certain that we're all into the full swing of our concert band preparations this semester, and we are faced with that constant question: how, what, and how long do we warm-up our concert band ensembles? The answers to these questions vary greatly depending on each ensemble's available class time, instrumentation, and ability level. But one thing is clear: the vast majority of us, director and musician alike, do not look forward to the daily warm-up. In fact, some of us outright dread it. Why? Because concert works are fun, and scales, arpeggios, and chorales aren't. That may be an oversimplification and a blanket statement, but I'm willing to stand by it. For students, daily warm-ups are the bitter medicine they have to endure before they get to enjoy "real" music. This doesn't make it any fun for the director either!

This problem has all sorts of ramifications. First, if the warm-up is uninteresting or not engaging to the students, they will certainly not give their best effort. Secondly, since the warm-up comes at the beginning of class, this lack of energy and effort can "poison the waters" for the remainder of your class time, negatively affecting how your students play throughout all portions of the rehearsal. So, how do we fight this problem? The answer is "Game on!"

Game On!

I know it can sound cliché, but applying games, challenges, and competition to your warm-up process can energize your warm-up, your students, and yourself. Here are some techniques you can use to get your student-musicians to bring their best "game" to warm-up!



Are you Bored?

Here's the first and most important test: are you, the director, bored during the warm-up? This is the biggest warning sign that you have an ineffective beginning to your rehearsal. If you ever find yourself bored, then remember this simple rule for yourself and for your students: "If it's boring it must be simple, and if it's simple it must be easy, and if it's easy it must be perfect. And once it's perfect, let's make it harder." Try these tricks below to do just that!

Attacks and Releases at Strong Volume

Don't let your students start rehearsal with an anemic sound and airstream. Start with playing forte! Long tones, at full volume, are a great way to get your students' lungs moving and resonating their instruments with rich sounds. Make sure they're emptying their lungs before breaths, forcing them to take full inhalations.

Get Them Singing (and Buzzing) Loud and Proud!

Dialing in pitch, and breaking through your students' lethargy, can be helped by having them stand up to get the blood flowing. Have them stand to sing through your chorales. Not loud and strong? Stop and start again until you get the effort and volume you want. If your students are resistant or embarrassed about singing, then have them sing through their instruments while fingering the proper notes. Have the woodwinds play the chorale while your brass players try to "out-buzz" them in volume. Tell your woodwinds not to make it easy on those brass!

Unison Chorales in Multiple Keys

We all want our students to be comfortable playing and focusing on intonation in multiple key centers. So don't be afraid to stretch their limits by playing the same chorale in different keys.

You can easily create a unison chorale with any legato melody. It could even be a melody from your current performance folder (even better!). For example, if your band is playing Holst's *First Suite in Eb*, take the opening chaconne phrase and plug it into your notation software of choice for every instrument in your band. Now your warm-up is also helping your students practice a phrase from their music, and they're having to tune to every other instrument in the ensemble. You can have them play it, sing it, brass buzz it, you name it. In fact, you'll find it very useful to actually mix and match these techniques mid-phrase. Finally, you can now easily transpose that chorale into multiple keys, tackling a new key center every one-to-two weeks.

Push Technique to the Limit

Scales are more than scales: they're the first technical challenges our students face. So don't let them get comfortable playing them in easy tempos. Push them to their limits with progressively more challenging speeds on those scales.

Appeal to their Competitive Side

Have individual students play for the class everyday! Work your way around the room throughout the week. Don't just let your strongest performers be the only one's that play, but they can certainly use this time to "show off." Cultivate a classroom where your strongest performers receive adulations from their peers, while your weakest performers get encouragement and positive reactions to their efforts. With all of the technology at our fingertips, weekly recording or SmartMusic assignments of scales, at set tempos, can be used to create a leaderboard of top performers in your class, with rewards and privileges you determine for your top performers. You don't have to show everyone's rank, but you can certainly show the top performers! Anything from candy, to gift cards, to bus loading priority can be used to motivate these high achievers.

Don't Leave Out Your Percussionists!

Don't let your percussionists just sit there through the warm-up process. They need to know how to play their scales on the mallets. But beyond scales, what about rudiments? Rudiments can be played on snare drums, practice pads, and on mallets! Paradiddles, flam-taps, and more, at faster and more challenging tempos, can be employed during scale warm-ups.

As always, make sure you set aside enough time towards the end of warm-ups for your percussionists to prepare all equipment needed for the works you'll be rehearsing.

In Conclusion

We're never going to enjoy scales, chorales, and long tones as much as playing a great piece of band literature. But that doesn't mean we have to make warm-ups such a chore! If you'd like a quick, easy, and **free** resource that contains many of these techniques, you can [download my "Concert Winds Care and Feeding" 12-week method](#). Try these techniques with your band today and you'll find that not only does their sound and technique improve, but you and your students will begin to look forward to warm-ups, and your class time will start out on a much more positive and energetic footing!

Ward Miller (b. 1978) grew up in Loachapoka, a small farming community near the city of Auburn, Alabama. He earned his bachelors of music education from Auburn University, graduated from Arizona State University in 2003 with a masters in Trombone Performance, and was awarded a D.M.A. in Band Conducting from the University of Iowa in 2011. In 2023, Dr. Miller co-authored the GIA-published textbook *Developing Error Detection Skills in the Wind Band Educator* with Dr. Cathryn Foster. He is nationally certified by the National Federation of State High School Associations to adjudicate musical events. He has had articles published in the *Alabreve* (Alabama's state music education journal), the *Illinois State Music Educators Journal*, and the *Journal of Band Research*, as well as regular articles in *School Band and Orchestra Magazine*. In addition to his writing and his many guest appearances across the country, Dr. Miller has ongoing educational consultancies with multiple college and high school programs throughout the United States. He currently resides in Minneapolis, MN where he lives a vibrant personal and professional life.

Join us in February for the All-State Ensemble Concerts at Minneapolis' Premiere Performance Venues!

100% of February Concert admission proceeds go towards MMEA Scholarships! In 2024, MMEA awarded a total of \$41,826.50 in scholarship funds and 88 scholarships to students for the 2024 All-State Camps. The scholarship funds also provide access to the Elementary All-Star Choir and The Plug Showcase Concert for any student or school program who requests support.

[Click here to purchase your All-State
Concert tickets today!](#)

Friday, February 17, 2024 - The Dakota

All-State Jazz Band Concerts - 6:30 PM & 8:30 PM

Saturday, February 18, 2024 - Orchestra Hall

All-State Choir Concert - 10:00 AM
Soprano-Alto Choir, Soprano-Alto-Tenor-Bass Choir, and Tenor-Bass Choir

All-State Large Instrumental Ensembles Concert - 1:00 PM
Concert Band, Symphonic Band, Orchestra

Beyond Measure

Ungrading Your Classroom

By Chris Gleason

Chris Gleason is the Arts and Creativity Consultant for the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction. His work at the state level has led to the creation of the Wisconsin Creativity Summit and Wisconsin Arts Celebration Project, linking artists, musicians, poets, and educators to create a unified work. A former instrumental music educator with 25 years of experience, he has received numerous accolades, including Wisconsin Teacher of the Year (2017), Finalist for National Teacher of the Year (2017) and Horace Mann Award for Teaching Excellence (2022). Chris is also the Executive Officer and founder of a non-profit called “Beyond The Notes Music Festival, Inc.” which has to date inspired more than 45,000 young musicians through non-competitive festivals and the ComMission Possible Project. In his free time, he produces and participates in a below average podcast called “Beyond ArtLess”.

I grabbed my clipboard and stood by the door as the bell rang for second period band to begin. I deducted five points from those students who were not in the room and only two points for those within a few feet. As I turned to face the ensemble, I tallied points for those students assembling their instruments quietly and deducted points for those who seemed to be taking too much time. As I began walking up and down the rows, I added points for those students who had a pencil on their music stand. As I did this, one student shouted to his friend in the percussion section, “Hey what’s for lunch today? I immediately deducted points for shouting. I continued my walk of the band room scoring points for music in order, practice chart filled out, posture, and not playing their instruments. After nearly ten minutes of this daily routine, Suzie, a spunky red-haired clarinet player raised her hand and said with great exasperation, “Mr. Gleason are we, like, ever going to play?”



“Ask the students to create the rubric by asking ‘What’s the goal?’, ‘How will we see growth?’ and ‘What does excellence look like?’”

This vignette describes a typical class my first two years of teaching. It is surprising that any of my students continued in band! Thanks to great mentors, a good deal of curiosity, resilient students and a lot of research, I have transformed my approach to assessment. Our traditional grading systems are fraught with bias, coercion, manipulation, and labeling. Grading is a tool and a form of "technology" that has been used for multiple purposes. This term allows educators to consider how to apply technology and how to update our tools, and it is my belief that this outdated system needs a major overhaul.

The Origins of a Failed System

The story of grading begins with Adolphe Quetelet in Belgium in the 1800s. As a young mathematician, Quetelet admired Sir Isaac Newton and aspired to uncover hidden laws governing human behavior, just as Newton did for the universe. Seeking a stable society with sensible laws, Quetelet applied a system of averages, commonly used by astronomers, to measure human characteristics. He believed that by averaging the measurements of thousands of people, he could identify the "Average Man" and that society should strive to continually improve this average.

This concept persisted into the 1950s when the US Air Force used similar methods to design a standard airplane cockpit based on the average measurements of over 4,000 pilots. However, they found that not a single pilot fit the average dimensions, and even when considering just three dimensions, only 3.5 percent of pilots fit. This highlighted the flaw in assuming that designing for the average would accommodate individual variability.

Frances Galton, who regarded Quetelet as an authority on social statistics, diverged on the idea of the Average Man being Nature's ideal. Influenced by his cousin Charles Darwin, Galton believed in improving beyond the average and coined the term "eugenics" in 1883. He advocated for genetic determinism, the belief that human character is primarily dictated by genes. This view, promoted by figures like Carl Brigham, Lewis Terman, Edward Thorndike, and Frederick Winslow Taylor, led to biased and destructive practices in education and management, overshadowing the unique potential of individuals. (Rose, 2016)

Ten Reasons Why Grading and Other Extrinsic Motivators Don't Work:

1. It diminishes students' interest in whatever they're learning.
2. It creates a preference for the easiest possible task.
3. It reduces the quality of students' thinking.
4. It traps learners into concentrating on how well they are doing the task rather than on the task itself.
5. It tends to crush creativity.
6. It crowds out good behavior and encourages unethical behavior.
7. It fosters short-term thinking.
8. One letter or number is incapable of representing the complexities that it is meant to summarize.
9. It creates competition and comparisons.
10. It continues and potentially grows the bias "baked into" the system. Grades reward those who have resources, time, support, and prior knowledge. Grades often do not recognize and support students with fewer support systems and who have experienced more systemic barriers to academic success as well as more negative experiences with schools and other institutions of power.

The Seven Paradigm Shifts to Move Beyond Labels:

Ungrading your classroom requires a shift in not just procedures and materials, but rather of mindset.

- **Shift 1:** “Grading Is Not Necessary for Learning But Feedback Is.” What students crave is information about something they are passionate about. Dump the labeling and create more opportunities for feedback.
- **Shift 2:** Assessment is not the same as “evaluation” but includes it. The assessment process requires you to gather (or notice) information/data, evaluate it by examining it, and then act upon it. Here’s the catch - the “act” doesn’t have to be assigning a grade! It might just mean that you decide to reteach the concept with a different strategy.
- **Shift 3:** Start with why. If you are creating an assessment, start with defining the purpose of the assessment. What question are you hoping to answer?
- **Shift 4:** Who is assessing? Where the feedback originates is important. Do not underestimate the power of self-reflection and peer input beyond just your critique.
- **Shift 5:** It begins with quality teaching and curriculum. “One can have the best assessment imaginable, but unless the accompanying curriculum is of quality, the assessment has no use.” - Howard Gardner
- **Shift 6:** When to assess? We’ve heard a LOT about formative and summative, but how much do we consider diagnostic? Where are your students starting from? What unique skills and aptitudes do they possess? How can the learning be personalized to meet their individual needs?
- **Shift 7:** How to assess. I believe the secret to life (and assessment) is to pay attention. Notice, ask questions, be curious. Create opportunities for students to demonstrate learning in ways that speak to them as individuals. Provide the three keys to intrinsic motivation: autonomy, mastery, and purpose. Above all, ask good questions. The best teachers in my life asked me the best questions.

Moving Forward in a Broken System:

I know what you are thinking, “This is all great but I HAVE to grade!” It is important to realize that we all work within “systems” of education. As Sir Ken Robinson said, The fact is that given the challenges we face, education doesn't need to be reformed -- it needs to be transformed. (Robinson, 2009) The transformation that Robinson suggests can and must start with you and your teaching. Here are some suggestions on where to begin:

- **Learn** - Read more about the ill effects that extrinsic motivators and grades have on our students. Also, learn about organizations like [Mastery Transcript Consortium](#), who are leading with new tools to communicate student growth and understanding that does not involve labels
- **It Starts With Them** - Stop handing out rubrics that you or ChatGPT created and instead, ask the students to create the rubric by asking “What’s the goal?”, “How will we see growth?” and “What does excellence look like?”
- **Diagnostic assessments** - Create strategies to learn more about your students. This is essential in learning more about what they need and how best to teach them.
- **Formative assessments** - Involve the students by asking them to demonstrate learning in ways that resonate with them. Choice and agency are powerful tools in education.
- **Summative assessment** - ask students to create a body of evidence that illustrates their own growth and achievement. If a final grade is necessary, ask the students to determine a final grade based on the body of evidence they provided.
- **Share it** - Find a system that efficiently and effectively shares the growth and learning taking place in your classroom with stakeholders. Tools such as AutoCrat or Formmule can be incredibly powerful tools to share reflections created by students.
- **Advocate** - Find other teachers in your school who feel the same as you do. Speak with your administrators and other school leaders to develop strategies to reduce the emphasis on grades while transitioning to better forms of feedback.

Teachers should dismantle outdated grading practices and adopt equitable, individualized assessment strategies that promote deeper learning and stronger student-teacher relationships. It's time to dismantle outdated and unfair grading practices and replace them with equitable methods that will transform your teaching and your relationships with students. Students deserve better feedback, thoughtful questions, and more opportunities to demonstrate their learning in ways that resonate with them. We need to move beyond traditional measurements and embrace a new approach to assessment by ungrading our classrooms.

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Mark your calendar and join us at Midwinter Convention to recognize our Music Educators of the Year!

All of our Award winners will be recognized at **The WARMUP** on Thursday at 1pm. Come to celebrate your peers, and to prepare yourself for a weekend full of professional development, networking, and MUSIC!



2024 Award Winners from left to right: Elizabeth Winslow, Arthur "L.A." Buckner, Scott Rabehl, Nicole Thietje, Becca Buck, Kim Kreutsch, Matthew Olson, Amy Comp

Sing as the Character, not as Yourself



By Nicholas Wayne

Something I cannot stress enough to my students in my own studio is the importance of staying true to the character when singing musical theatre roles. Character analysis is not only important to how a student acts the role, but also how a student sings that role. Due to this necessary character analysis, I find my pedagogical approach to teaching a student a musical theatre song to be very different from how I approach teaching a song from, say, *26 Italian Songs & Arias*.

In order to describe how I coach a student through a musical theatre piece, let me first set the stage (pun intended) by discussing the main points of what musical theatre is NOT—namely, opera. Opera prioritizes the exhibition of world-class music and the technical proficiency of its singers. Attendees of opera anticipate a specific style of singing, typically characterized by classical forms rather than popular styles. Within operatic contexts, moments such as cadenzas allow for improvisational elements where singers can showcase their vocal agility. The emphasis in opera tends to be on the individual singer's abilities, rather than the narrative or character development.

In contrast, musical theatre fundamentally revolves around well-defined characters who sing to advance the plot and deepen character exploration. Characters express their desires, aspirations, and motivations through song. A musical relies on the synergy of *all* its elements (including the musical elements) to convey a cohesive narrative. In order for this synergy to be obtained, it is crucial that musical theatre characters sing in a manner consistent with their spoken dialogue. As a result, when I coach a student on a musical theatre piece, the emphasis *must* shift to how the character would sing this piece, rather than how the student, as an individual performer, would sing the piece. For example, I would coach the student (say, a student named Elizabeth) to sing the powerhouse ballad *She Used to Mine* from *Waitress* as Jenna (the character), rather than as Elizabeth.



“WHEN I COACH A STUDENT ON A MUSICAL THEATRE PIECE, THE EMPHASIS MUST SHIFT TO HOW THE CHARACTER WOULD SING THIS PIECE, RATHER THAN HOW THE STUDENT, AS AN INDIVIDUAL PERFORMER, WOULD SING THE PIECE.”

When selecting repertoire with the student, our initial step is to identify the song type. The landscape of musical theatre encompasses four song classifications that facilitate narrative progression through musical notes, rhythms, and lyrics. I view these classifications, as articulated in Lehman Engel's *The American Musical Theater*, as frameworks within which creativity can flourish, rather than constraints limiting artistic expression. These song types or classifications are as follows: 1) **Ballads** convey a singular emotion or thought, 2) **Charm** songs invite engagement from listeners or fellow characters, 3) **Comedy** songs aim to evoke laughter, and finally 4) **Character** songs reveal deeper aspects of the individual's persona. The song type certainly informs the techniques and style of singing needed.

During this initial learning phase, it is also critical that the student know the sequence of events within the musical that lead up to the song, so that they can make informed vocal choices. I provide the student with a song analysis worksheet that guides them through this process, which encourages them to consider a range of inquiries regarding the character who is singing. Key questions include: How old are you? (as age significantly influences reactions); where are you?; why are you there?; what do you want?; what are your strategies for achieving this?; what do you risk losing if you fail?; and, how does the character evolve by the end of the song? I will also continue to pose these questions directly to the student throughout our lessons as time spent with the piece goes on.

Throughout our study of the song, I will also engage with the student in an extensive discussion about what famed musical theatre composer, acting coach and author, Craig Carnelia, refers to (in his book of the same name) as *The Reason to Sing*. For instance, consider the song *Shall I Tell You What I Think of You?* from *The King and I*. When studying this piece, I would ensure the student understands this particular moment in the narrative is rich with implications. By this point in the story, Mrs. Anna has resided in the royal palace for several months, and various tensions surrounding her role and the King's authority create a fertile ground for a powerful character song. Understanding this backstory is essential for establishing the motivation for the song, and it is critical this motivation informs how the student sings the piece.

Not only is an in-depth review of the song type and context important for the student to study, but a granular analysis of the music itself is also necessary. I prompt students to examine any musical motifs that hold dramatic significance. The composer's intent can often be gleaned from the nature of the accompanying figures. For instance, the low, resonant Db major chords at the outset of *Defying Gravity* in *Wicked* symbolize Elphaba's emergence into her power. Similarly, the rhythmic representation of horse hooves and the bounce of the surrey during Curly's song in *Oklahoma* encapsulate thematic elements, while the repetitive ostinato in *Just a Housewife* from *Working* conveys the character's frustration with her domestic life. These musical components are deliberate choices that merit careful consideration.

One item of note related to the study of musical motifs that I discuss with my students is the use of unwritten riffs and opt-ups. As described above, composers invest considerable time and effort in crafting scores that advance narrative and thematic elements. When performers prioritize personal expression over the integrity of the original work, they risk undermining the authors' intentions. It is essential to recognize that certain composers, including Leonard Bernstein, Stephen Schwartz, Jonathan Larson, and Andrew Lloyd Webber, have embedded opportunities for vocal embellishments within their scores, such as ossia parts, optional transpositions, and ad libitum sections. In these instances, I teach students that their creative contributions should emerge organically from the emotional context, rather than serve as self-indulgent displays.

In my correspondence with Stephen Schwartz regarding the concept of vocal embellishments, I sought clarity on the concluding moments of *Defying Gravity*. His insights were both enlightening and constructive. Mr. Schwartz noted that the "war cry" at the conclusion of this number allows for individual interpretation by the actress portraying Elphaba, albeit within the bounds of harmonic and rhythmic structure. While he acknowledges the space for emotional expression is present here, he cautions against excessive ornamentation, likening it to trends in popular talent competitions, which often promote self-aggrandizement over authentic character representation.

In conclusion, musical theatre thrives on character-driven narratives, wherein songs serve as integral vehicles for expressing and telling those narratives. By comprehensively understanding the contextual, thematic, and musical nuances of each piece, performers can breathe life into their characters in ways that resonate profoundly with audiences. In this art form, each note, rhythm, and lyric contribute to the unfolding narrative, revealing the heart of the story.



Started in 2023, MMEA offers a program for high school music students interested in pursuing a career in Music Education. The program, called Minnesota Future Music Educators (MFME), will be held on Thursday afternoon of the 2025 MMEA Midwinter Convention.

Registered students will attend sessions focusing on what they should consider doing now to prepare for a career as a music educator, as well as what they can expect from this career choice. This program is open to current high school sophomores, juniors, and seniors.

*Note- This program is not for high school students interested in performance majors or other music careers, but solely for students who wish to explore a major in Music Education.

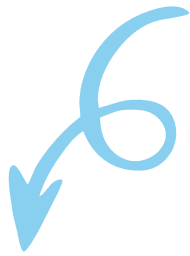
At the sessions, topics of discussion will include:

- Typical university music education requirements for entry
- What students should be doing now while in high school
- Preparing for a college music school audition
- Career paths available with a music education degree
- Music education programs beyond large ensembles
- Things you never realized your music teachers had to do

If you have students who would be interested in this opportunity, have them visit the MFME webpage to sign up!

<https://mmea.org/events/mfme/>

More



The power of community is apparent in this final article. Greater Twin Cities Youth Symphonies teacher has developed an El-Sistema inspired program to build musical communities in two St. Paul schools. By connecting with families, school administrators, and other educators, students gained access to musical experiences that may not have otherwise been available to them.

In Community

53 GTCYS HARMONY AND RIVERVIEW SPANISH/ENGLISH
DUAL IMMERSION SCHOOL

The Power of Community

GTCYS Harmony and Riverview Spanish/English Dual Immersion School: The Power of Community

By Mary Sorlie

Enter the cafeteria of Riverview Spanish/English Dual Immersion School on a Tuesday morning, 90 minutes before school starts, and you will see and hear laughter, conversation and string instruments. Over 60 elementary students gather at tables, waiting for announcements and perhaps the “word of the week” before heading up to classrooms for their violin or cello small group sessions. This is Harmony, a program of the Greater Twin Cities Youth Symphonies (GTCYS).

In 1975, El Sistema (The System) was founded in Venezuela by Jose Antonio Abreu. The program began with eleven students and has grown to more than 2 million students who have played in El Sistema orchestras, perhaps the most notable being conductor Gustavo Dudamel. A rigorous program, students in Venezuela rehearse up to four hours per day, six days a week. At the heart of El Sistema is the mission of social change. With the motto of *tocar y luchar*, (to play and to strive), “El Sistema is a social change/youth development program that uses ensemble music to enable every child to experience being an asset within his or her community. El Sistema develops citizens, not musicians—responsible, joyful, contributing citizens.” (Booth, 2017).

After much conversation with community, family and educators on the West Side of St. Paul, the vision of El Sistema inspired GTCYS to create Harmony at Riverview West Side School of Excellence in St. Paul (now Riverview Spanish/English Dual Immersion) in the fall of 2016. Launched as an after-school program, Harmony began with 18 3rd graders learning the violin. Now in its ninth year, Harmony has expanded to include 4th and 5th grades and cello instruction with more than 60 students led by seven teaching artists. On Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday mornings, students arrive early for Harmony classes which run from 8:00am-9:15am; the school day begins at 9:30am. Arriving before school is a commitment from families, as transportation is not provided. Families connect with each other to help with carpool and transportation logistics. Located in the heart of the West Side of Saint Paul, over 70% of the students who attend Riverview are multilingual and Hispanic. In fall 2024, GTCYS added a second site with 40 more students at L’Etoile du Nord French Immersion, also in St. Paul. Both sites meet three mornings a week before school and offer summer programming.



Mary Sorlie is the current Artistic Director and Lead violin Teaching Artist for the Harmony program of the Greater Twin Cities Youth Symphonies (GTCYS). She also conducts the GTCYS Philharmonia East and West orchestras.



As an El Sistema-inspired program, Harmony strives to create access and opportunity for students who want to learn violin and cello. Harmony's mission is to create stronger learners, build confidence, and open doors through music. We seek to deepen connections within the Riverview School community and the greater community. When our partnership at Riverview began as an after-school program, we had minimal contact with classroom teachers and other students at the school. Harmony teaching artists would arrive just as teachers and classrooms were wrapping up their day. Since switching to a before-school model, the connections that we have made with the school community have been greater and at a much deeper level. We are in direct, daily contact with the classroom teachers. One of Harmony students' most anticipated activities is performing alongside the school's general music teacher, Sam Harvey-Carlson (Mr. Sam), for Riverview students in the breakfast line before school. Harmony musicians take great pride in sharing their musical talents with peers.

Each year, we find new ways to connect and collaborate with the Riverview and West Side communities. Harmony explores a variety of musical genres, including music that honors students' cultures. After our first mariachi camp in the summer 2023, mariachi music is now a staple of the repertoire that we learn and perform and was a huge thrill for our students to perform at the West Side's Cinco de Mayo celebration last spring. Harmony also performs with GTCYS at Orchestra Hall and at Humboldt High School each year. When students graduate from Harmony in 5th grade, they can continue their musical journey by participating in GTCYS' school-year orchestras. Private lessons are offered to supplement their learning and provide access for students who so desire. More than 40 Harmony alumni are thriving in GTCYS' orchestras, with more joining each year. Philharmonia East is the GTCYS beginning level orchestra and weekly rehearsals are held at Neighborhood House, which is one football field away from Riverview. Tuesday afternoons at Neighborhood House are filled with violin and cello lessons, as well as Philharmonia rehearsals in the evening. Harmony parent and current Riverview principal Stivaliss Licon-Gervich says, "There is the Riverview school community and then there is the tighter community within, which is the Harmony community. They take care of each other and in the end they become a family." When a student was asked why they wanted to join Harmony, his response was "because this is like my home."

One of El Sistema's key tenets is that students teach other students once they learn a skill or piece. This past year, Harmony students performed for the school's 5th grade graduation, as well as for the spring music program. Even though these pieces were not part of Harmony's repertoire, students learned their parts independently. Walking past the music room last spring, new pieces could be heard, where small groups of string players were learning pieces that Mr. Sam had given to them. Riverview teacher Briana Brunzell-Looney comments that "In addition to becoming part of our school community, GTCYS has provided an opportunity for students to explore their musical talents and express themselves in new ways that are not accessible during the regular school day. This partnership has not only enhanced the overall cultural atmosphere of our school but has also strengthened relationships among students, teachers, and families, creating a vibrant environment where music serves as a unifying force. The program has inspired a sense of belonging and pride, encouraging students to engage more actively in both their education and community life."

References

Booth, E. (2017). *The fundamentals of El Sistema: Which inform and guide El Sistema-inspired programs*. <https://ericbooth.net/the-fundamentals-of-el-sistema/>

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