



Finding Their Rhythm

Music educators and researchers emphasize the importance of music in our schools

Shelby Anderson and Peggy Hill-Breunig

The data and research agree: good music education programs support high-achieving students.

A 2007 study published in the *Journal of Research in Music Education* reported that students in high-quality school music programs score higher on standardized tests compared to students in schools with deficient (or non-existent) music education programs, regardless of the socioeconomic level of the school.

A landmark study from 2004 and published in *Psychological Science* assigned 144 children to keyboard lessons, voice lessons, drama lessons, or no lessons. Researchers found that children in the music groups exhibited greater increases on an IQ test than students in the drama lessons or those without lessons.

This isn't surprising to Christine Hayes, a general music teacher at Lincoln Inquiry Charter School in the Whitewater Unified School Dis-

trict. In her 17 years at Lincoln, a K-5 student-inquiry based school, she has seen her students reap the benefits of music education.

"The more we've learned about how the brain functions, the more we've learned about how music positively affects brain stimulation and brain growth," Hayes said.

Hayes, who also serves as chair for the National Association for Music Education's (NAfME) Council for General Music Educa-

“The outcomes associated with arts education

— which include increased academic achievement, school engagement, and creative thinking — are becoming increasingly important.

The opportunity to learn about the arts and to perform as artists is an essential part of a well-rounded curriculum and complete education.”

— *President’s Committee on the Arts and Humanities (2011)*

tion, says when her students are in general music classes working on projects or practicing music, they are developing social and emotional skills; deepening their knowledge, not just of music but of a number of other subjects and topics; and, in the act of performing, writing or reading music, they are activating and exercising their brains in ways that no other subject area does.

For an example of how music education can deliver all of these benefits to students, Hayes talks about an in-depth project she has developed for her fourth- and fifth-grade general music class. The project is a six-week composition project driven by student interests. Students write music based upon a

premise or theme selected by the class. Classes have picked themes such as planets or natural disasters — whatever they are interested in.

Before writing any music, students research the theme or subjects and ask themselves how a certain element of that theme could sound, what the format of the piece should be, and any number of other questions. Then students work together to write their compositions. As different groups of students finish a movement or part of a composition, Hayes records the students performing their piece as the entire class listens. The final compositions are assessed by students and the teacher with a rubric based on student-generated criteria.

The project doesn’t stop there.



What the Research Says

Over the years, many studies have been published that report on the benefits music provides to the brain and learning.

A recent issue of *Education Week* reported on a study from the University of Southern California’s Brain and Creativity Institute. The study found that, “music training may increase the neural connections in regions of the brain associated with creativity, decision making, and complex memory, and they may improve a student’s ability to process conflicting information from many senses at once.”

Based on these findings, researchers say music education can be used to foster brain plasticity, and treat learning disabilities related to language and hearing.

Dr. Nina Kraus, a professor and neuroscientist at Northwestern University, has found research that music education improves students’ memory, attention and communication skills and can even help close the “academic gap between rich and poor students.” Additionally, Kraus has found that music education during childhood can help sharpen the brain’s response to sound into the adult years, even if, as adults, they no longer actively participate in music.

Ana Pinho, a neuroscientist at the Karolinska Institute in Stockholm, Sweden, has found that music education can be helpful at any age. “Even after stroke and disease, starting musical training can still help you get more from your brain,” she said. “All of these findings show [musical training] can create a lot of plasticity that can produce effectiveness across the brain, in cognition and behavior.” □



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Students then collaborate with their visual art classes to create art works inspired by their composition. Students wrap up the project by making a movie using their artwork and music.

The project is student-driven. Students work in teams, they learn about a range of topics, and they use and develop a number of skills such as communication and collaboration. Hayes says the skills and knowledge that students gain in music directly relate to other school subjects and learning objectives such as 21st century skills.

“Music is not an isolated island,” Hayes said. “We are integral in all areas of education.”

Outside of the classroom, Hayes is on a team of music educators from around the country that is drafting the new Common Core State Standards for music. She is on the writing team for third through fifth grades. The team has met every

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Monday night since last February and the music standards are scheduled to be released this spring.

The learning processes and elements that will be included in the new standards for music are emphasized in Hayes's class projects. For instance, the creative process, a basic process used in all of Hayes's classes has students imagine, investigate, construct a product, and reflect.

"This is exactly what we're doing when we're writing and performing music," Hayes said. "There are so many higher-critical thinking skills taking place."

■ A District-Wide Focus on Music

For years, the Neenah Joint School District has worked to offer a number of opportunities for students

in all grade levels to get involved with music.

"I think our community sees music as an important connection between the district and the community, and also sees its importance in enhancing the education of our students," said Superintendent Mary Pfeiffer.

In elementary school, all K-5 students take general music. As early as third grade, students can begin taking after-school lessons on a stringed instrument and in fifth grade, students can begin taking band, choir, or orchestra.

In sixth grade, all students participate in band, choir, orchestra or a general music class. In Neenah, all sixth-grade students are in one school. Music class occurs at the end of each day, oftentimes, the different music groups will come together to

put on performances for one another.

"I think there is a really nice appreciation of one another – they're all doing music," said Kristi Stingle Neenah Joint School District K-12 music department chair and Neenah High School orchestra director.

At the middle school and high school levels, students have multiple opportunities to take and participate in different levels of band, orchestra, and choir. At Neenah High School, which has about 2,000 students, students can pick from two string orchestras, four choirs, three bands, and an advanced Jazz ensemble. Orchestra, band, and choir all have advanced groups.

"The teachers are very dedicated," Stingle said. "They spend a lot of time with students and give

STUDENTS AND STAFF WORK TOGETHER TO PROVIDE OPPORTUNITY FOR STUDENT

Justin, a senior at Waunakee High School, has always loved music. His mother thinks it started when he was just six months old, and music would play by his side in the hospital as he recovered from the first of what would become many surgeries due to complications of bilateral schizencephaly, a rare birth defect with symptoms similar to cerebral palsy.

Justin started attending school within the Waunakee Community School District at age three and is now a high school senior. Teachers describe him as a joyful, social teenager with a sense of humor, big smile and infectious personality.

He has played cymbal in the high school band since his sophomore year although, because of his condition, his ability to participate in marching band activities was limited. A team of high school students in an engineering class and their instructor, Ryan Ubersox, asked what they could do to help. This started a collaborative effort involving the music department, the engineering class and special education staff who understood the intricacies of Justin's daily life.

In May 2013, students presented the cymbal attachment for Justin's motorized wheelchair they had constructed. The students discussed the process they went through to design and build an attachment that was strong enough to hold a cymbal at the proper angle for playing.

Since then, the cymbal attachment has seen a lot of use.

"Justin's experience in band has done tons for his confidence, responsibility, sense of belonging, social greetings,



physical control, and the early stages of learning to read music," said Wendy Van Asten, a member of the Waunakee special education staff. "With the cymbal now properly attached to his chair, we can work on even more skill development areas his participation in music can provide."

Justin's inspirational story is also a testament to the educators in the Waunakee music department, who believe all children have a right to a music education.

"Music provides another means through which children can express feelings and ideas even if they are non-verbal or unable to express themselves in other ways," said Kathy Bartling, music department chair. "We adapt our teaching, materials and resources to enable all students to learn from the experience and participate in connecting with others through music." □

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them a great opportunity.”

“I can’t credit our staff enough,” Pfeiffer said praising Stingle and her colleagues’ work. “They, with the rest of our staff, really help Neenah shine.”

As far as students participating in music groups, Stingle agrees that the practice, study, and performance of music aids learning. But, at the middle school and high school levels, she also sees another side of music. From Stingle’s point of view, the opportunity to participate in music can help students find a niche and develop a passion they may not have otherwise discovered.

“Students are coming from all different places,” Stingle said. “Maybe a student who doesn’t necessarily feel comfortable speaking out in another class comes to my class and they feel comfortable with their instrument....There are a lot of kids who find themselves in their music classes and watching them grow from their freshman year to their senior year is just amazing.”

■ More than Just Performing

Timothy Schaid, executive director at the Wisconsin Center for Music Education, says the power of music education isn’t just students performing but rather the work, learning, and experiences that occur every day in the music classroom.

“The learning that takes place in music class is just as important as learning that takes place in math or English class,” Schaid said. “In music classes, students are collaborating, they are being creative — deep-level learning is taking place. Music class is one of the many important cogs at our schools.”

Other organizations like The Partnership for 21st Century Skills, a non-profit devoted to promoting and supporting 21st century readiness, agrees that music and the arts are a crucial part of a child’s education. The organization lists the arts (which includes music) among its list of core subject areas.

Schaid, who was a music educator and then a high school prin-



cipal before serving as executive director at the Wisconsin Center for Music Education, says there is also a positive academic effect from participating in music. Schaid remembers, as a principal, noting that students who were involved in music had higher grade point averages. Some would argue that higher-achieving students tend to participate in music, however, Schaid would argue this isn’t necessarily the case.

In addition to offering positive benefits for students and schools, music

class offers another opportunity for a student to find their niche and passion. Just like athletics, drama, tech ed, fine arts, or any other classes or opportunities offered at a school, Schaid says it’s another opportunity for students to find their place.

“I’ve seen music classes bring students to school that otherwise wouldn’t have come to school.” ■

Anderson is editor of Wisconsin School News.

Hill-Breunig is president of the Waunakee School Board.

Music Associations in Wisconsin Offer Support and Opportunities

The Wisconsin Center for Music Education is a music educational facility serving students, educators and community members throughout Wisconsin. The first of its kind in the nation, it has an extensive music resource room, keyboard lab, recording studio, videoconference services and is a catalyst for innovation and the growth of music and arts education throughout the state. The center is open to teachers, students, and interested individuals, and available for field trips.

The Wisconsin Center for Music Education is home to three organizations that support music programming for schools and students and professional development for music educators: the Wisconsin School Music Association (WSMA), the Wisconsin Music Educators Association (WMEA), and the Wisconsin Foundation for School Music (WFSM).

Timothy Schaid, executive director of the Wisconsin Center for Music Education, encourages interested school leaders, educators, and students to contact the center to see how it can benefit and support music education in your district.

For more information, visit www.wsmamusic.org.