

Why America Needs to Continue Funding Music Education in Public Schools

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Introduction

My high school alma mater, State College Area High School—and the State College School District as a whole—is incredibly fortunate when it comes to music education. Music is a required subject of study until high school. Elementary students are encouraged to begin an instrument in 4th grade, and one string



Figure 1: Because the State High band room is the lowest geographical point in State College, it floods nearly every time it rains, causing water damage to the building, storage, and instruments. Photo credits: Hannah Fecko

director and one band director go between elementary schools to offer group lessons during school, and to conduct ensembles before school. At the middle school level, students have the opportunity to join a choir, and continue playing in band or orchestra. It used to be that the middle school jazz band would have a “homeroom”—effectively the first class of the day—where the students rehearsed every day, instead of every third day. This program only lasted one year, before the school administration replaced homeroom with standardized test prep. State High offers seven choirs, three orchestras, four bands, and two rock ensembles, in addition to a number of smaller chamber groups. And until recently, it held a 40-some year record for sending the most students from a single school to All-State music festivals.

And yet, the band room still flooded, music was publicized less than sports, and the school elected to spend \$9 million to fix a sinkhole in the high school football field instead of purchasing new band uniforms, or fixing a crack in the choir room large enough to see daylight through, or lessening the costs for music-related trips.

Why the state of music education is the way it is:

The state of music education has deteriorated over the past several years. The educational system continues to value academic achievement over creative thinking, largely because aptitude in subjects like English and Math is quantifiable. The excessive focus on improving scores on standardized tests means music programs are not afforded the time, funding, and respect of core classes; a local example of this was the previously mentioned jazz band homeroom, which was replaced by supplementary English and Math education. As stated by Joseph Pergola, a retired director of Fine Arts from the William Floyd School District and member of the New York State Council of School Music Administrators, writing for the [National Music Education Committee](#), “Recent legislation, with its obsessive focus on testing in reading and math, has disqualified some students from participation in elective music programs and has left little time in an already overcrowded school day for music.”

This is partially due to No Child Left Behind, which shifted educational focus to academic performance, but overlooked the arts. Ron Whitehorne, writing for independent news source [The Notebook](#), referenced a March 2006 study by the Center on Education Policy in Washington, D.C., which found that 71% of surveyed school districts had cut time from other programs in order to augment English and Math instruction. 22% of elementary schools noted a reduction in music and art education.

These temporal disadvantages to arts programs were exacerbated by budget cuts as a result of the recession. These cuts effectively transferred costs for extracurricular activities from school to parents. A [2011 study of Chicago elementary schools](#) found that only 24% of schools are given funding for more than one full-time position in arts or music, while 65% have to choose between an art or music teacher. 8% of Chicago elementary schools have no funding for arts or music positions (See Figure 2). Such struggles are reflected on a nationwide scale, with music programs being some of the first to be defunded when schools lose money.

According to a 2012 [Department of Education](#) study conducted by Basmat Parsad and Maura Spiegelman, statistics as of 2010 did not appear discouraging at face value: 94% of elementary schools and 91% of secondary schools offered music instruction. But there are several problems with statistics. One of them is that, according to the numbers, the smaller a school gets, the less likely it is to have a music program; this means an estimated 2.1 million children are not offered music education. High-poverty schools offering music education dropped from 100% in 1999-2000 to 81% in 2009-2010. Those that still offer it have less time, resources, and teachers. Pergola reiterates this point: “Students attending wealthier school districts have a greater opportunity for a well rounded, balanced education than lower income school districts.” Decreased availability of music education is a problem particularly in low-income schools, because studies suggest disadvantaged students benefit greatly from an arts education. Secondly, statistics rarely discuss the staggeringly high student-teacher ratio for music classes, which can sometimes be as high as 1 teacher for 1000 students, according to a 2012 [NPR Article](#) expounding on the 2012 DOE survey. This information is obscured in the DOE report, in one of 165 total supplementary tables.

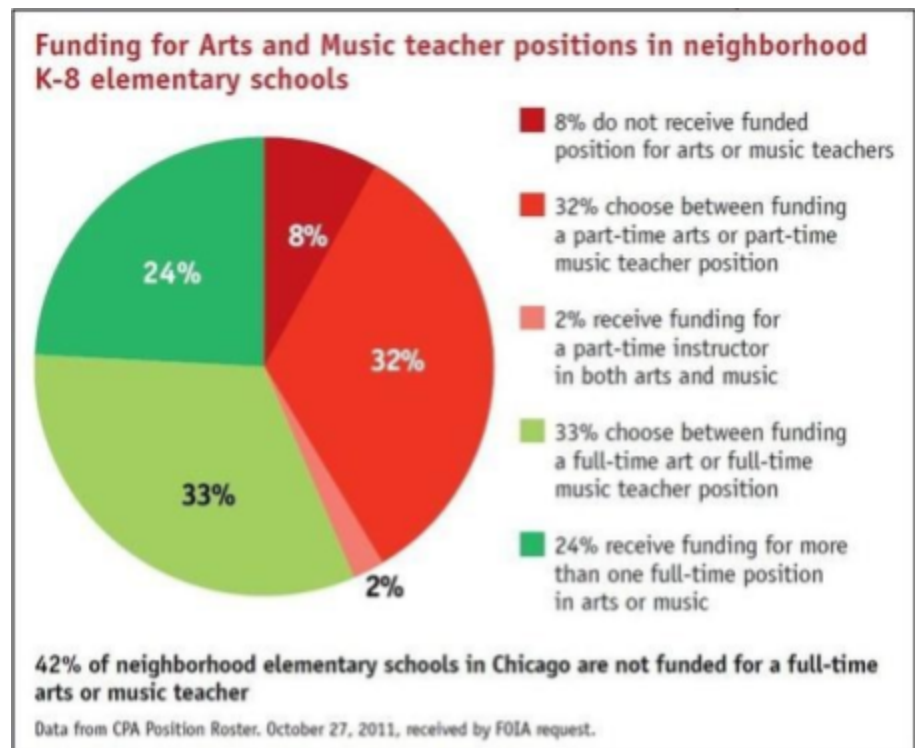


Figure 2: A visual breakdown of how funding affects positions music and art instruction jobs in the Chicago area as of 2011. Accessed from <<https://img.buzzfeed.com/buzzfeed-static/static/2014-12/2/7/enhanced/webdr04/enhanced-buzz-17631-1417523306-8.jpg>>

The NPR piece discussing these statistics also analyzes music instructors' responses to problems within music education (this information is also scattered among a handful of supplementary tables): programs lack financial and material resources, as well as adequate instruction time and specialists. The article examines the benefits of music education, concluding that "In short, the arts help create young adults who have better academic outcomes, are more civically engaged and exhibit higher career goals."

Benefits of music education (Academic and otherwise):

I asked several musical peers and teachers to detail the positive impacts music has had on their lives. Some praised music as a creative outlet, others were thankful for the sense of community created by music ensembles, and several others were grateful for their lifelong appreciation for music, fostered by music education. In addition to improved musicianship as a result of music education in schools, many stressed its social benefits, articulating that numerous friendships were formed as a result of music in schools. Several indicated that music education led them to pursue music degrees: "Music education has honestly given me everything I have in my life right now. Without music, I would not be where I am in my life. I would not be at the college I am at right now, I would not have the friends I have right now, and I certainly would not have the passion for music that led me to choose [my current] major" (Cecilia Leskowitz, flute performance major at Catholic University). Others praised the qualities music education instilled in them, such as leadership, perseverance, and a drive for excellence. One college student, who elected to remain anonymous, thanked music for teaching them "Invaluable life skills such as critical thinking and problem solving, teamwork, historical study and discipline. It has also afforded me to opportunity to begin teaching and developing my interpersonal skills."

Studies have proved music education's abundant benefits range from the social to the neurological. [A PBS Parents](#) article found that music education can catalyze or improve a child's development in other areas. Music enhances young children's inherent ability to decode sounds, and thus helps in language development—this sentiment was echoed in an April 2014 [Royal Conservatory](#) article). A 2004 article in *Psychological Science* (cited in the PBS Parents piece) showed that music education in the form of piano and voice lessons for 6-year olds resulted in an IQ 3 points higher than 6-year olds who did not get the education. Neuroscience has demonstrated that neural growth is larger in children who have music education. A [US News](#) article cites two studies analyzing the long-term neurological effects of music education, one conducted by Virginia Penhune and the



Figure 3: Though satirical in nature, this Venn Diagram illustrates how many of the values instilled in musicians are applicable outside musical settings. Accessed from <http://4.bp.blogspot.com/-FBA0tVWrXw8/Vd0HxDeSxSI/AAAAAAAAACSE/9lc61D7ZyKM/s1600/07musician.jpg>

other by Nina Krauss. Penhune discovered that the earlier children begin musical instruction, the stronger the connection between their left and right brain, while Krauss found that older adults who studied music at an earlier age were able to process speech faster than adults with no musical training. Music education for elementary students increases fine motor skills and improves basic memory recall. A 2007 study published by Christopher Johnson demonstrated that music education improved elementary school children's test scores.

benefits of music education
According to Dr. Sylvain Moreno of the Rotman Research Institute

Language Ability
Students who study music have better phonological skills, which means they can identify and separate sounds well. This, in turn, enables them to quickly learn words, develop a richer vocabulary, and learn to read earlier.

Emotional Resilience
People with musical training experience better communication between the right and left hemispheres of their brain than those who do not have musical training. This increased communication has been linked to increased creativity.

Empathy
Music increases children's ability to pick up on the nuances of speech which reveal the underlying emotion, which is crucial for emotional intelligence.

Long-Term Health
Studies demonstrate that lifelong music study can delay the onset of dementia and compensate for hearing loss in adults. Music therapy has also been proven to effectively treat stutters, autism, and Parkinson's disease.

Increased Brain Capacity
People with musical training typically have larger frontal and temporal cortices.

Figure 4: An overview of the benefits of music education as outlined by Dr. Sylvain Moreno in an interview with the Royal Conservatory.

The aforementioned Royal Conservatory article also analyzes the social benefits of music instruction, finding it improved language abilities, emotional resilience, empathy, long-term health, and brain capacity, as well as attention span and self confidence in students (see Figure 4). The piece concludes, “Scientists now believe that the changes in the brain caused by music training can lead to improvements in general cognitive skills like memory, attention, and reading ability, all of which are predictive of educational outcomes.” Some are uncomfortable with using the academic benefits to defend music education in schools. For them, music for music’s sake is just as important for a student’s education as English or Math. But administrators are indifferent to pleas of “Music is awesome” —they need a quantifiable, educational reason demonstrating that music instruction is essential for students.

Locally, the benefits of music education manifest on a more personal level. A number of classmates in my graduating class taking AP courses and maintaining high GPAs were involved in the music program. Both our valedictorian and salutatorian were musicians, and planned to continue playing throughout college (both now attend Ivy League schools), though not as their major. State High also has a chapter of Modern Music Masters (known as Tri-M), a nationwide organization for academically and musically high-achieving students that encourages outreach not only to the school as a whole, but into the community. The State High Tri-M organizes events like Vocal Valentines, an annual Barnes and Noble fundraiser, and helps teachers plan for festivals. Tri-M contributes to the music community, and serves as an avenue for developing planning skills and leadership in students.

Tri-M is just one of many opportunities for students to grow as leaders within the music program; some positions are commonly found in music programs, while others are unique to State High. Marching bands offer students a chance to not only forge strong social connections with their peers, but to pursue positions like rank leader, drum major, or band president. Each role differs drastically in responsibility and scope: drum majors conduct the band, the president handles the logistics, and rank leaders make sure their rank knows the drills, and inspects them before each event (to make sure their uniforms are correct). Each in-school ensemble requires several leaders: principal players in every ensemble are expected to ensure uniformity of performance, i.e. intonation, bowings (orchestra), vowels (choir), and style, in addition to leading sectionals. The concertmaster of the orchestra and the band and choir presidents are expected to lead rehearsals if the director is away. Student secretaries take attendance, librarians organize and manage the music library, and yoemen for the choirs set up and tear down the risers and sound shells for concerts.

In addition, the State High Master Singers has a unique choral program, introduced by Robert Drafall, retired State High choir director. Students with at least two years in the ensemble are allowed to audition for one of two student conductor positions in an annual Maroon and Grey concert. The interested students are encouraged to attend conducting workshops and choose a program consisting of one to two pieces, in addition to a mandated audition piece, before the tryouts even take place. The students audition in front of the choir, and are elected by their peers. The choir then splits in two, and each conductor prepares their half of the choir. Adjudicators are brought in for the concert, and conduct a masterclass with the student conductors during the second half of the concert. This experience is invaluable to those who plan on pursuing music education.

While State High affords many musical opportunities locally, there are various music festivals through which students interact and perform with musical peers outside their home school. In Pennsylvania, intrastate festivals take place every year on a district, regional, and state level. Students undergo an audition process for each festival, and the top-scoring musicians are selected to progress to the next level. Student musicians also have the opportunity to audition for two inter-state festivals, which alternate biennially between an All-Eastern Conference and an All-National Conference. The conductors for the ensembles often come from conducting college groups, and thus expect a higher performance level from the student musicians. These festivals expose students to classical repertoire, and offer students a chance to play in groups which perform at a near-professional level. For many, these festival ensembles will be the best ensembles they ever play with. For those who do pursue music as a career, these musical experiences not only contribute to a résumé, but also provide a taste of the standards expected from professional classical musicians.

Not only does the large music program offer a community for SCASD students to bond through music—ranging in genres from orchestral to rock—but it also offers students multiple opportunities to work with professional musicians without ever leaving State College. As previously mentioned, the Maroon and Grey concert is an opportunity for select students to work with professional choral conductors. The jazz band participates in multiple workshops over the course of the year, where musicians are coached by professionals, at no cost to the students. World famous bands like the Woody Herman Band and Jazz at Lincoln Center have coached high schoolers, which has not only provided them a once-in-a-lifetime musical experience, but a chance to hear about the professional world from those who thrive in it. There is no Math or English analog which touches so many students in this way.

State High music groups have opportunities for travel as well. Every year, the school takes six ensembles: three choirs (all-male, all-female, and Master Singers, an advanced mixed voice choir), two bands (symphonic and jazz), and one string orchestra on an Adjudication trip. The groups have travelled to places like Washington D.C., New York City, Boston, and Toronto, and each trip blends unique musical experiences with time for students to explore the area. For instance, while in New York City, some students went to the Statue of Liberty, others to the Museum of Modern Art, and a select few had the opportunity to work with two Broadway performers, both of whom were State High graduates. These trips provide students with the chance to network, perform in spectacular venues (like Riverside Church in New York, and Carnegie Hall), and most importantly, develop a responsibility to the whole ensemble akin to teamwork, but with an absolute standard that sports rarely have.

The music program at State High provides an opportunity for international cultural exposure that some students may otherwise never experience. Every three years, the top jazz band, string orchestra, and mixed choir from SCASD travel to Europe to perform. The groups perform in a multitude of venues, from international jazz festivals to small Medieval churches. Just this last summer, the choir sang for a mass in the crypt of the unfinished Sagrada Familia, before having an opportunity to sing in the basilica as well.



Figure 5: State High Master Singers performing at the Sagrada Familia July 19, 2015. Photo credits: Susan Trolier-McKinstry

In sum, the State High music program is, in many ways, a prime example of what music education should provide students in all schools: opportunities to perform, to grow as musicians and as people, and to instill in students a love for what is fast becoming an underappreciated artform. But even SCASD's music program cannot escape the abuses of the administrative axe, as performance facilities and funds deteriorate, precluding the program from reaching its full potential. The sub-par conditions and lack of awareness means the program cannot showcase the masterly work of the ensembles as well.

Consequences of Minimized Music Education Funding:

A 2014 study conducted by Frederick Burrack, Phillip Payne, Dale E. Bazan, and Daniel Hellman detailed the consequences of curtailed music education on [3 midwestern states](#): Kansas, Nebraska, and Missouri. In Kansas, 60% of school districts eliminated a total of 220 arts related positions from 2007-10. According to 127 Indiana superintendents, 89 elementary music, art, and PE teachers were laid off, while 59 secondary education arts teachers were let go in 2010-11. In the region, a loss of 375 music teacher positions was recorded from 2011-12. The study goes on to note: "The possibility that this loss of music teaching positions may affect the accessibility of music instruction and hinder the establishment of foundational learning for advanced study in music is an important concern. There are no results to suggest a reduction in music offerings for students, just fewer teachers to provide instruction and guidance" (Burrack, Payne, Bazan, Hellman). The loss of arts-related jobs was the result of financial strain, but Burrack & co. found that a smaller budget has not curbed enrollment in music programs, resulting in higher student-teacher ratios. This means students receive less personal feedback, which is particularly critical for musical development. Though funding cuts did not affect program offerings, teaching practices, or programming decisions, more teachers were required to teach outside their area of expertise, and thus the quality of the instruction decreased. The other issue with understanding the effects of budget cuts is that there is little information as to whether the funding beforehand was sufficient.

James Catterall, a professor in UCLA's Graduate School of Education & Information Studies, wrote an article on the [PBS blog](#) in March 2014 entitled "The Consequences of Curtailing Music Education." In it, he noted the recession resulted in the slashing of arts programs on a global level. The repercussions Catterall outlines are the absence of the benefits of music education, the multiple merits of which have

been demonstrated in a multitude of scientific studies. One of the first studies in the late 1990s gave rise to what the media dubbed the Mozart Effect: listening to Mozart sonatas slightly increased spatial awareness in college students. Other researchers followed suit. In addition to the neurological virtues of music education in elementary students mentioned in previous paragraphs, one study demonstrated that long-term music education led to higher math proficiency in 12th graders, with the effects particularly noticeable among lower-income students. Cutting music education means children no longer have the same opportunities to perform and grow as musicians, particularly among low-income families who can't afford private lessons.

But emphasizing the academic benefits of music education is a mixed blessing. On one hand, music educators are willing to emphasize every benefit so administrators will continue to grant the program funding. On the other hand, musicians prefer a music-first argument: music for music's sake, and the skills gleaned from music education in public school should be of equal import to its academic benefits.

Music programs, like sports teams and after-school programs, are credited with keeping teenagers from drugs and gangs. *El Sistema*, a Venezuelan organization founded in 1975, was so successful in keeping children off the streets that similar programs have been replicated all over the US. Programs like this are effective because when students may not have a healthy family dynamic at home (a trait commonly found in high-poverty areas), they seek community elsewhere. Music ensembles foster an environment which allow for students to develop personal bonds with their peers; this camaraderie means students are less inclined to seek relationships in gangs. The phrase "Music saved my life" is not unusual to hear when people, particularly from disadvantaged backgrounds, describe how music education has impacted them.

Policy Proposals

Since removing music education from schools has been demonstrated to be detrimental to students, what can be done to keep it in schools? At a national level, a redistribution of the federal budget to allot more funding to education would put less strain on parents to financially support music programs. Under President Trump's [2018 budget proposal](#), not only does the Education Department face a 14% cut, but the National Endowment for the Arts could lose 100% of its funding, in order to support a bolstered defense budget.

The federal government could continue to progress from the 2015 Every Child Achieves Act (ECAA), which named music and art as "core" subjects. Though No Child Left Behind was repealed with the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), passed in late 2015, the emphasis on standardized testing is still dominant. The success of these two acts, but particularly the ECAA, is due in part to the tens of thousands of constituents who implored their representatives to pass the bill.

Monetarily, districts could redistribute funds from sports programs (particularly football), to bolster the music department. As mentioned in the opening paragraph, the district elected to spend \$9 million fixing a sinkhole under the stands at Memorial Field for the football team. Meanwhile, music students endured water-damaged facilities and equipment, inadequate storage space, and asbestos in the band hall for years, while the administration did nothing to alleviate the problems.

In addition, music programs—in conjunction with administrators—should make a concerted effort to increase school-wide and public awareness of music events. Sports are well represented on the SCASD website and in the school year book. Sports have a separate section on the morning announcements, detailing what teams are playing where, and when, as well as the results of the games. Concerts, with the exception of the indoor marching band concert, are not advertised. Master Singers, in conjunction with Chamber Strings, performed an opera (Henry Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas*) this past year, but sports teams continue to take priority in funding and public awareness. Students and community members may already be interested in attending concerts, but are unaware of upcoming performances. Greater public awareness would bring in larger audiences. Increased ticket sales would mean the program would have more money to buy music and stands, and provide financial aid for trips so less fortunate students can go. With the high level of excellence exhibited by most State High ensembles, people who otherwise might not gain an appreciation for classical music will be exposed to it at a younger age.

The administration should be better cued in to the needs of the program, instead of half-correcting mistakes or abortively apologizing when their decisions have deleterious consequences on music education. More often than not, administrators overlook the rehearsal time needs of a music program. But if music educators and administrators work in conjunction to address the needs of the program, all parties will ultimately benefit, but especially those who should take first priority in matters of education: the students. By bolstering the music program, and making it high-quality and accessible from an earlier age, the students will reap greater rewards, and in turn, translate their experiences to other communities.

Students and parents must work in conjunction, contacting local and federal representatives over the importance of music education and what changes should be made to improve it. Students, especially, could take on a more active role in promoting the music program: small things, like including concert dates on the morning announcements, and establishing a greater social media presence for publicizing music events. Interested musicians should run for student government, where they can speak on behalf of the music program. Some districts have student representatives who attend board meetings as a voice for the student body; this position would allow students to interact directly with administrators while advocating for music education. There is no denying the innumerable merits of music education. Now we as a country must ensure that future generations can reap the same benefits by maintaining and ameliorating music programs in schools.