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Strengths and Struggles in Urban Music Education



During my NYSSMA® presidency I've tried to learn as much as I can about urban music education in our state. If we are going to make progress toward the goal of making music education accessible to all, then focusing on the large number of students in our urban centers makes the most sense.

I've made it a priority to visit our cities and meet with music teachers and supervisors, and I've been so very impressed by their dedication and passion. Urban educators are a very special breed. To be successful they need to be creative with limited resources and extremely caring of students facing very diverse situations at home.

I've asked the music supervisors in New York's four largest cities to contribute to this article by writing about the strengths of their programs and some of the challenges they face. As you'll see, they are all making great strides toward increasing access to the students in their cities. They offer a wide variety of excellent programs while also facing many similar obstacles. There is much to be learned from their insights, and I thank them very much for their willingness to share their strengths and struggles with us.

Syracuse

One successful aspect of our music programming in the Syracuse City School District has been our push toward equity of access for all students. This concept has been a major focus of our work since I stepped into the supervisor role five years ago and it was included as a focus in our strategic planning and the resulting document, our Fine Arts Action Plan.

We reorganized staffing so that music staff was equitably distributed across our district both physically

and numerically. We have removed our rental fee for families and offer instruments to students for free. And, most recently, we have taken measured steps to grow our orchestra program so that all instrumental options of study are available to all interested students.

While we have made great strides in our equity work, we still have a way to go. School accountability structures that focus so heavily on a few core subjects reinforce the mindset that arts classes are separate or extra. School buildings feel a sense of urgency to remove themselves from lists, which is commendable, but

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this can lead to the marginalization of the arts (whether it be in terms of scheduling, space, building resources, etc.) without thinking more holistically. — Sarah Gentile, Supervisor of Fine Arts, Syracuse City School District

Rochester

Over the past five years, the Rochester City School District (RCSD) has steadily built school music programs that offer opportunities to students that would compare favorably to those of most school music programs across the state. All RCSD students have access to instrumental music lessons, as well as to vocal music and general music ensembles. All students in grades K-6 receive general music instruction by a certi-

fied music teacher. NYS mandates are met for students in grades 7-12, with instruction delivered by certified music teachers.

Instrumental string programming has increased tenfold over the past few years, as instruments and materials have become available. Strong partnerships with the Rochester Philharmonic Orchestra, Eastman School of Music and the Rochester Education Foundation have provided additional resources and supplemental opportunities for RCSD students while ensuring that the core instructional program is delivered by certified teachers.

The commitment by executive level leadership to ensure quality music programming and equitable access for all students has fostered growth and consistency within the school music program throughout the district. As a result, district-wide ensembles, such as The Pride of Rochester Marching Band, Voices of Victory Gospel Choir, and ROC City Players, have given students opportunities to participate in additional extracurricular music opportunities with their peers throughout the entire district after school and on the weekends.

While the RCSD has been able to provide a strong music program to students, there are always obstacles to overcome in order to ensure quality programming. In an educational climate where meeting accountability metrics is necessary, there is a constant fight for instructional time.

Teachers of pull-out lessons continually work to justify pulling students out of class for 30-40 minutes per week to learn an instrument or work on vocal training. National data and various studies support the notion that participating in music has benefits that reach far beyond the music classroom, but there is still a lot of

work that must be done at the policy level to ensure that students are able to participate in instrumental and vocal music lessons without upsetting their classroom teacher.

Other obstacles that remain constant are budget and changes in leadership. However, it is my belief that by continually showcasing the great work that students and teachers are doing in schools, it is difficult for those who make the tough budget decisions, as well as new leadership, to make decisions that negatively impact music programming. — Dominic Pickard, Director of Arts, Rochester City School District

New York City

New York City is home to the nation's largest network of student musicians and public school music teachers and, as such, opportunities abound. From symphony to salsa, NYC public school students can opt to perform in a wide array of school, borough-wide, and citywide ensembles. NYC Department of Education enrollment policies facilitate student enrollment in schools with offerings that match their unique needs and interests, regardless of zip code.

In addition to band, chorus, and orchestra, musical study can include Latin ensemble, steel pan ensemble, Korean drumming, modern band, and music production. And real-world music learning extends beyond the classroom, as top-notch live performances in every genre imaginable are just a subway ride away, and the world's premiere concert halls and institutions, in conjunction with the City's large portfolio of local cultural organizations, present a plethora of opportunities for NYC students. In addition, the City's network of 1,000+ music teachers enjoy a wide variety of music-specific professional learning experiences, career opportunities, and resources.

Although extensive school choice allows for great opportunity, implementation proves challenging, as feeder patterns are fluid and can be difficult to identify. Incoming ninth

graders can arrive at a high school from more than 100 different middle schools across the City, and their prior school music experiences can be just as varied.

Although music course curricula align to a common framework – the NYCDOE Blueprint for Teaching and Learning in Music – music learning experiences and course offerings can differ vastly from school to school. This means more opportunities for older beginners, but it also means building a common technical foundation at every juncture of transition, e.g., elementary to middle and middle to high. — Elizabeth M. Guglielmo, Director of Music, New York City Department of Education

Buffalo

The Buffalo Public School's Music Department is proud to celebrate the following steps towards (1) providing their students and community with the highest quality of classroom and music performance experiences so they may be life-long lovers, learners and supporters of various styles of music and (2) equipping teachers with the resources necessary to be highly effective practitioners.

During the past four years, music staffing has grown from 72 to 90 full-time employees; a multi-year textbook adoption has provided teachers with new, K – 5 hybrid (online and in-hand) textbooks, with grades 6 – 8 to be adopted in subsequent year; newly developed K – 12 classroom, instrumental, and vocal curricula have been implemented; every grade 5 – 8 building has access to instrumental music, and, as a result of a vibrant and growing relationship between the Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra and Buffalo Public Schools involving a variety of specially-designed, collaborative programs, more than 20,000 K–12 students have experienced live orchestra music.

During the 2018-19 school year, the music department applied for and was awarded a substantial federal Title IV-Well Rounded Education grant. As a result of these funds,

the department was able to equitably provide 340 new band instruments, a 39-piece world music drumming equipment suite for every K–8 building, and 178 new stringed instruments. Additionally, teachers will be provided professional development in order to improve their world drumming proficiency and strengthen their instructional planning and implementation of the new, NYS Learning Standards for the Arts.

Although the Buffalo Public Schools Music Department takes great pride in the progress that we've made, we have our vision set on goals for the 2019-20 school year and beyond. In order to provide more music education opportunities, it is the goal of the department to continue expanding the instructional music staff, particularly in the district's high schools.

In an effort to continue rebuilding our aging instrument inventory, it is the goal of the department to strengthen partnerships with prospective community donors and continue applying for local, state, and federal grants.

Lastly, as we continue to improve instruction, it is the department's goal to continue to accumulate a library of best practices; evaluate, revise, and implement scope and sequence in our curricula that meet the individual instructional needs of all students; and develop a more diverse and culturally responsive selection of music course offerings. — James C. Schwanz, Supervisor of Music, Buffalo Public Schools

As I re-read these entries, the thing that resonates with me is the pride that these four leaders have in their programs and the accomplishments of their teachers. It has been an honor for me to get to know them, and I look forward to continuing to help make NYSSMA® more accessible to urban educators as we work together to make the magic of music education accessible to all. ||