

Mankato school offers music for English learners, Adv20

MANKATO, Minn. (AP) — Four young pairs of eyes are trained quietly on instructor Patti Tryhus.

She tells her eager pupils to align their noses, elbows and toes with the strings of their violins. She reminds them to have good posture and distribute weight evenly across both feet.

Nearby, a small handful of music educators and academicians are holding their breath, anxious to see how well these four English-language learning students can play.

Someone presses play on a CD player in the front of the room and the unmistakable, dulcet tones of Johann Pachelbel's "Canon in D Major" begin whispering through the speakers. As if on cue, four elbows begin drawing four bows across over four wooden instruments.

And suddenly, the basement classroom at Franklin Elementary is alive with music.

"You sound so fantastic," says a tall stranger at the conclusion of their practice session. "Just fantastic."

The stranger is Larry Scripp, a nationally renowned music educator and researcher who is chair of the music education department at the New England Conservatory. Unbeknownst to the young violinists, Scripp has been working for nearly a decade to turn piles of research touting the multidisciplinary benefits of music into something that can be attained and measured in the classroom.

And on Wednesday, as Scripp observed the program being held for the first year in Mankato Area Public Schools, he said the goal is nearer than ever.

"The first step is finding schools that believe," Scripp said. "And then starts the hard work of actually doing it."

And Franklin is doing it.

Based on the principles of Scripp's Music in Education National Consortium, the Franklin Elementary Walkabout program is hosting a summer music program aimed at boosting the academic skills of English-language learners. The program is sponsored by the Mankato Symphony Orchestra, which has helped provide staff and secure grant funding from the MARDAG and Rockefeller Foundations.

For four days a week, students spend half the day learning to play several instruments. On Mondays and Wednesdays, it's violins. On Tuesdays, students sing and learn recorder and, on Thursdays, students play the drums.

Each day, students practice the same sounds and songs, but on different instruments. They learn to read and perform musical notes on a modified staff that resembles a mathematical x-y plane.

Along the way, students learn to read left-to-right and decode symbols (founding elements of English-language acquisition) while also learning spatial reasoning, logic and problem-solving skills.

Students in the program are evaluated at the beginning and end of the program to determine progress. The hope is that by integrating music into several other content areas, students will increase learning and achievement.

"We teach one concept in several different ways," said Alex Barnett, of Mankato, who has performed with the Mankato Symphony Orchestra as well as the Minnesota Opera Chorus and teaches drums during Franklin's summer program. "We can cater to all different types of learners."

But Scripp and his music education aren't out to prove that music is the sole solution to higher achievement. Instead, Scripp said he wants to prove that a sustainable and integrated fine arts program can benefit all students across all disciplines.

But those words — sustainable and integrated — are the keys.

To ensure sustainability, Scripp's curriculum provides staff development and training opportunities. To ensure integration, teachers are trained to teach musical concepts in a way that draws on the content of other disciplines (for example: using an x-y grid to read music or using drum beats to work on language phonemics).

"There's been more research on music than on any other art form," Scripp said. "Now, it's about using that research to adapt school policy."

When the summer music program concludes on Aug. 20, students will hold a concert for parents that will showcase both musical and academic skills.

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