

Why Music Isn't Just for "Smart" Kids



This is a guest post from Leanne Sowul. Leanne is a music teacher and writer from the Hudson Valley, NY. You can find more of her writing at [Words From The Sowul](#).

For the past thirteen years, I've worked in a public school district nationally recognized for music achievement, where over 85% of students sign up for an instrument starting in fourth grade. As an elementary band teacher, I get to be there for all of the beginnings: the first time new band students put their instruments together; the first time they produce a sound; their very first band rehearsal. Growth happens fast and motivation is high. Yet despite the excitement, constant learning, and small victories, I feel uneasy.

I worry because I know within the next year or two, some of those students will quit playing their instruments. And in a majority of cases, it will be for reasons having nothing to do with motivation or desire. That majority of kids will have one thing in common: they struggle in school. They are the kids with low scores on state tests; the kids who have IEPs (individualized education plans); the kids who are pulled out of class not only for music lessons, but for speech therapy and reading help.

They all start instruments in fourth grade, but by the end of fifth, they're mostly gone.

I've tried to counteract this attrition. I've doubled down on my efforts to give extra help to kids who struggle, to be in touch with their parents more often, and be flexible with classroom and special services teachers about lesson times. But I sometimes feel like I'm fighting against a force that's stronger than the nitty-gritty of lesson and practice time: a belief that these kids, because they struggle in school, shouldn't be playing an instrument.

This belief is dead wrong. In fact, music participation can benefit a struggling kid even MORE than his "average" or "smart" kid counterpart.

1. **Music teaches a rich array of skills and character developments that help kids succeed in other parts of school and life.** Playing and practicing an instrument teaches vital organizational and productivity skills that quickly cross over into classroom work. It also teaches confidence, performance, grit, and peer collaboration.
2. **Music provides a community with other students during the school day.** Struggling kids often get the sense that they don't "belong" in school. Band, orchestra and chorus give them a feeling of teamwork and kinship with a group that meets regularly. In fact, many kids cite that music is a key reason for *wanting* to attend school.
3. **Music is an engaging subject.** Yes, playing an instrument is a lot of work, but it's fun work. Kids come into my classroom motivated and excited to learn more; that's the nature of the subject. Yet parents of struggling students who quit their instruments tell me, "She needs to focus more on her school work." If a student is focusing "too much" on music, wouldn't it make sense to celebrate that focus and try to apply it to other subjects? Don't cut off the only subject where she has learned to focus!
4. **Music kids get extra face time with teachers.** Struggling kids always need more time with teachers who can light their fires of motivation and concentration. A student who studies music is seeing more teachers during the school day, which gives them more opportunities to get the extra attention they need.
5. **Music lessons create accountability across the board.** There is no evidence that pulling kids out of regular school activities for lessons in any way interferes with their learning in other subjects. In fact, leaving the classroom and having to make up work later may actually help students take ownership of their education in other subjects. [In this study by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development](#), there was found "either no effect or a positive effect of pullout instrumental music programs on the achievement of participating students."

Kids who are especially creative often have less-organized (or "messy") minds ([according to Scott Barry Kaufman's research on creativity](#)) and don't do well in traditional school subjects, but thrive in music. In our current educational climate, with emphasis on core curriculum and testing, we are failing these students. We are failing them because their

parents and non-music teachers see them struggling in school, and believe that the solution is to pare down their “non-essential” activities. As music is not considered essential to the core curriculum in most places, struggling students are encouraged to quit. But this is the exact opposite of what we should be doing for our most creative, messy-minded kids.

What you can do...

If you're the parent of a struggling child... sign him up for school music lessons and keep him in the program for at least a few years. You should see a marked improvement in your child's focus and retention in other subjects as a result of studying music.

If you're the teacher of a struggling student... do everything in your power to keep her motivated and involved with music. Keep lines of communication open between her classroom, music and special services teachers, and show the student that you care about how she is doing in all areas.

If you are or once were a struggling student who now thrives in music... share your story with others! Music is a vital educational component that is currently being overlooked by most administrators and lawmakers. By working together and sharing our success stories, we can show the world that music benefits everyone.