



A “Neighborhood Strings” After-School Program

Overview

In the last two decades, many schools around the country have drastically reduced arts programs for children. It is our view that schools that cut the arts deprive students of critical pathways to creativity and imagination. Fighting back against this creative drain are growing numbers of programs that recognize the power of music to promote social change and nurture promising futures for youth from underserved communities. Music can play a key role in students’ academic and creative development, and builds a community of youth, families and instructors. As the heartbeat of a community, a music program can foster imagination, discipline, cooperation, leadership, and civic engagement.

An intensive, community-based educational program would foster your community’s or program’s ability to transform the lives of urban youth through music. Children who are immersed in the richness of music education learn more than rote skills; the pursuit of musical excellence teaches youth to strive for quality in all areas of their lives.

Our vision is to make existing arts support the seed of a bigger project that would enrich the lives of youth through free music lessons and meaningful mentorship. We envision as the ideal complement a free program that offers lessons in a downtown space. The music program will center on giving every student the opportunity to play a stringed instrument. By providing an after-school program with intensive instruction in violin, viola, and cello, the program would seek to build a community around the joy and discipline of music-making.

Here is an outline of the main components of a proposed community music project through the idea of “Neighborhood Strings.”

Background

A music project could offer a wealth of opportunities to communities and neighborhoods in need whose youth have little access to creative arts.

Recent music projects for underserved communities around the country have had striking success. Community MusicWorks in Providence, Rhode Island is an urban string quartet residency that, among other measures of achievement, has sent every graduate to college in its

fifteen years. OrchKids in Baltimore, Tune Up Philly, and the Harmony Project in Los Angeles are all robust orchestra-based programs modeled upon El Sistema, the thriving Venezuelan youth orchestra program.

Goals and Intended Outcomes

This kind of program is long-term and seeks to nurture many aspects of its students' lives, and as such its intended outcomes are multifaceted. Youth will discover a creative outlet that hones life skills like discipline, cooperation, imagination, and leadership. Teachers will be encouraged to forge strong relationships with students that strengthen the program's ties to the community. The focus is not just on the child as a musician, but the child as a citizen and a contributing member of society.

The program must provide affordable, high-quality arts education; it must be open and easily accessible to the neighborhood; it must foster family involvement; and it must have sustainable public value.

As in any community-based program, it will hope for a give-and-take learning relationship with its youth and families. Rather than imparting knowledge and skills in one direction, the program will strive for a model that shares knowledge in both directions. The teachers, mentors, and performers of WCMS will be enriched by this relationship to its own neighborhoods and audiences as the neighborhoods are enriched in return.

Program Startup

Working with partners already involved in the arts and/or education can be a great way to get started with a string program. These programs often have an infrastructure, other partners, and funding base they may be willing to share as part of their mission. Some potential partners:

- Local symphony or chamber music organizations
- Programs for at-risk kids (Boys and Girls Club, Salvation Army)
- Charter schools
- Youth orchestras
- Sistema USA (based at New England Conservatory)

Location and Potential Partners

This kind of programming should be located at a site easily accessible to those areas. A good partner can be a community center that shares a similar mission and could lead to deeper contacts with at-risk youth and families. Other partners can be Boys and Girls clubs, schools, community centers, The Salvation Army and local higher education entities. Ideally, the program can plan for a space that could be a compelling center of the neighborhood.

As the program develops, college students can be ideal mentors who help deepen the connections between urban youth and the institutions that serve them. Community MusicWorks uses this model to great positive effect.

Program Design

Here's an example of program design: In the first year, approximately 10-15 students ages 6-12 will receive weekly one-on-one or small group lessons during after-school hours, and have the option to attend more than once a week. Students will receive instruments on loan and be expected to practice at home. The families will pay a small fee (\$10?) for loan of the instrument; all other programming will be free. The lessons will culminate in "performance parties" which will give the students chances to show off their achievements and involve the entire family. The program will help connect students with additional college-age mentors or practice buddies. Another element that has been successful at CMW is additional free concert trips to a variety of cultural offerings

The curriculum will include some introduction to improve listening and rhythmic skills as well as learning standard beginning string-instrument technique.

Instruments

In its first year, the program will likely seek rental instruments from a local luthier or instrument shop. In subsequent years, the program might seek instruments through donors and foundations like Classics for Kids Foundation.

Funding

Startup funding can come from a variety of sources: local community foundations, private support, the program's Board as part of its mission, existing school funds, grants, or benefit events put on by the teachers and founders involved. These events can be powerful ways to develop meaningful relationships with the youth, families, and local partners. These funds will support initial development of the program, teaching hours, and instrument rental. In subsequent years, the program would seek funding through grants and private donations.

Next Steps

In order to proceed with program startup, here are examples of next steps:

- Secure a teaching space at a local community center that will connect with youth from the right population and be reliably available during after-school hours.
- Obtain string instruments (8-10 violins, 3-5 cellos are a good example) by rental or borrowing
- Research potential partners for student performance spaces
- Begin to research future funding options that will make the program sustainable
- Apply for grants or gifts of instruments

Many thanks to Ariana Falk for her creative vision and design of this model. Ms. Falk is a graduate of Yale and Boston University, and participated in the Fellows Program at Community MusicWorks in Providence, RI