



# THE LEADING NOTE

Music News & Program Updates

## Is MBUSD at Risk of a 'Lost Generation' of Musicians?

Recently, the Recording Academy published an article entitled "Puppy Pads and Slit Masks: How Covid Changed the Look of Music Education." ([Read it here](#)). "It's a struggle to keep current music students engaged," the article notes, "but it's a completely new challenge to get more kids involved. Recruitment requires getting instruments into the hands of fourth graders and presenting the allure of a polished, performing ensemble — hurdles made higher by Covid."

If that challenge is not met, what will the impact on music education be? A 'lost generation of musicians,' according to Robert W. Smith, composer, arranger, and professor at Troy University. "If too few young musicians join band, orchestra and choir programs, the ensembles will see dwindling numbers in each subsequent year, all the way up to college groups." Smith likened it to the "aftershocks of an earthquake or second and third waves of a tsunami."

### Why it Matters: The Cost of a Lost Generation of Musicians

For those of us whose kids have only gone to school in MBUSD, understanding music education as a core part of a quality education may be so ingrained it's inherently valued. Perhaps music is so fundamental to our student's educational experience we can't really play out the thought experiment of what it would be like if music education went away. Or the ways in which that sudden silence would ripple through the lives of each student, the culture of every school, and the very nature of what it means to have been educated in Manhattan Beach.

The most widespread consequence would be on our students' neurological development. The developmental and neurological benefits of music education that begins in the early grades is such a settled matter of scientific inquiry there is little room for debate. To read just one of those longitudinal studies, click [HERE](#).

In addition, "one of the unique benefits of music education is the potential to build community," explains elementary strings teacher Katie Cavallaro. "Music gives students an opportunity to experience group achievements that are not possible individually. For example, the magnificent sound of a full orchestra cannot be achieved by one person."

The mighty sound of a full orchestra, choir or band ensemble is built slowly and continuously. The impressive variety and robustly populated ensembles that we see now are not immune from the impact of a lost generation. Dwindling numbers would affect the quality, size, and instrumentation (whether instrumental or vocal) of those groups. That, in turn, negatively impacts the learning environment remaining music students will have, eventually falling short of the full ensemble experience. Recalling those "ripple effects" Robert Smith warned of, even the type of literature music teachers could select would be reduced if their classes do not have the correct instrumentation.

Another impact point would be the reduction of music class offerings at the secondary level. As in any district where the powers that be always cast a cautious eye toward the dollars and cents bottom line, classes are offered or cut based on enrollment. Fewer students means less classes; Fewer classes means less levels; Fewer levels means less opportunity for students who remain to advance in their learning. At the same time, this cycle of curricular atrophy is exacerbated as our ability to retain or attract the most highly skilled music teachers is adversely affected. While we have all appreciated the superb performances a small chamber ensemble or elite vocal group can deliver, even that strength of sound would be lost if the ground that makes those ensembles possible is stripped away.

From the profound, longitudinal benefits to brain development, to the nexus between musicianship and social and emotional wellness, to the simple joy of shared music making, the positive impact of the continuity of music education we've come to expect is not a luxury. It is a necessity. And when seen in that light, the alarm that Robert Smith sounds about the danger of a lost generation of musicians cannot be ignored.

### What can MBUSD do to Insulate its Music Program Against this Coming Threat?

First and foremost, we need to continue to support the outstanding music faculty, who early on in the school reopening discussions displayed a profound understanding of how music education needed to change in order to continue to provide meaningful instruction in the online format. By shifting away from performance-focused instruction, embracing the benefits of smaller ensemble groupings, and implementing cutting-edge techniques of remote performing, audio recording and digital production, the music faculty displayed an adeptness and remarkable ability to pivot into the opportunity of the moment.

Even those who teach the District's youngest musicians reimagined their classroom approach. Ms. Cavallaro recalled her early experiences, "performing as a student with my school orchestra, some of the concerts were so moving, I could feel goosebumps or a tear in my eye. These experiences remind me how important it is to help students connect with music, their instruments, and each other. After all, students will only want to stay with music if they feel a connection. Helping students make connections has been a challenge in distance learning because we are all at home in isolation. I have been adapting by using platforms like Flipgrid to help students connect. On Flipgrid, students contribute videos of themselves playing their instrument to a group webpage. It's a way for them to see their friends and connect through music. It has also been a helpful tool for providing individualized feedback."

But the challenge remains: How could the youngest music students — those who are just picking up an instrument or learning proper vocal technique for the first time — do so without being in the same room as the teacher? How could proper embouchure be taught remotely? How could something as seemingly simple as tuning an instrument be accomplished over Zoom? And most importantly, when we have navigated through this time so defined by physical distance and isolation and are once again in the shared space of the classroom, how can the imprint of that "lost time" best be remedied in a way that doesn't leave students spiraling in frustration? How can we instead move them through early challenges which are always attendant to those first days of learning music, but have been exacerbated in the current climate, so that they can realize a sense of accomplishment and pride in their musical skills?

### Being Proactive in Preparing for the Coming Frustrations Can Help

When we are wholly back in school together, we will be changed by these months spent apart. The expectations that existed before won't have the same import, and our needs will have shifted because of the recent past. Even before Covid hit, our elementary music program was out of alignment with best practices for elementary music programs. We can use this opportunity not only to address the increased frustration levels we know are coming, but also to remedy that preexisting situation for the good of all students.

Neighboring districts with stellar music programs are rightly seen as setting the standard for best practices. In those programs, 4th and 5th grade music students receive instruction twice a week. The additional classroom time not only allows for an increase in the student's level of information retention, but also sets students up for success because it allows them to work through early frustrations — in our case, to make up for lost time and increased frustrations as well — so that students can reach a point of accomplishment with the challenging curriculum.

At first blush, though, it could be asked: What of the student who doesn't "like" their music class? For that student, wouldn't shifting to twice a week instruction in 4th and 5th grade be a negative experience? It is important to note that this question would not be asked of any other core curricular subject. Many elementary students may be frustrated by math or reading, but few would recommend abandonment as a solution.

Moreover, given the undisputed benefits to brain development in young people in all areas, including cognition, spatial reasoning, linguistics and verbal ability, it cannot be argued that music is somehow of lesser value than other subjects. In addition, a host of research on how young people learn reinforces that children are embodiments of potential that can be nurtured or extinguished based on the approach one takes. If we apply proven principles of growth mindset here, we can easily conclude that students are capable of thriving in their music instruction if they are empowered to persist in the endeavor with the right tools and the right environment ~ doing so provides the opportunity for success to be realized.

But could it also be said that this example proves the point? If this hypothetical student is having a frustrating experience, isn't it because the current structure does not meet their needs? When considered this way, the quantitatively thin scheduling structure that currently exists for 4th and 5th graders essentially ensures that such students are effectively stuck in educational quicksand. The status quo for such students is not a beneficial system worthy of perpetuation. Indeed, this very student — the one who doesn't "like" music — is actually the most compelling reason to implement a structural change specifically designed to address this core problem. If we are proactive in this moment — before the coming tsunami reaches our classrooms — we will not only have improved the individual student's musical experience, but we will also have taken an important step to insulate our program from the "covid shockwaves" to come.

### Light At the End of the Covid Tunnel

We all look forward to the day when the extraordinary work and ingenuity the faculty have done over the last several months will be in our rearview mirrors; when students can play together in large ensembles in their music classrooms, and teachers can once again look out onto those neat rows of precisely aligned black chairs. These are the signs of "normal" we are all so eager to see.

But when our students are back in those classrooms they will be changed. The imprint of the last year will be carried with each person in their own unique way. It makes sense that changed students coupled with changed community expectations provide the needed landscape for introducing an improved structure to the elementary music program. The time is right for implementing a redesigned and enhanced elementary music program that not only is better equipped to provide meaningful music instruction in the short term, but also goes farther in ensuring the long term success of each student it serves.

In the meantime, we can turn our thoughts and actions to where they are needed most: our elementary music students. "In the elementary program," Ms. Cavallaro says, "we are starting from square one. Most of our students never picked up their instrument before this year. As an elementary music teacher, it's important to set students up with a solid technical foundation. However, it is equally important to help students manage emotions. Learning an instrument is challenging, and it is natural to hit bumps in the road. In the virtual environment, it can be difficult to determine which students are feeling frustrated. I always give students the option to stay after class on Zoom to ask questions or get extra help. However, I also encourage parents to reach out to the music teachers if their child is having a hard time. Sometimes a student just needs a bit of encouragement from the teacher. Other times, a hard time being spent with a student specific issue and the teacher can give targeted advice that will help. Either way, the music teachers want to support the students, so don't hesitate to contact them."

We at the MB Music Coalition take these words to heart. We know that parents may be at a loss as to how to help if their student is struggling in music. To respond to that need, we've set up House Music, an online Parent Resource Center, and pledge that if we don't know the answer to your question, we'll connect you with the people who do. Feel free to visit us at [MBMusicCoalition.org](http://MBMusicCoalition.org), or email us at [MBMusicCoalition@gmail.com](mailto:MBMusicCoalition@gmail.com).

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