

Mariachi is Inspiring a Revolution in Music Education

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Acoustic guitars are flying off the shelves at Iowa-based West Music, one of the country's largest and oldest distributors of instruments for schools and school districts. Not just any acoustic guitars, but Spanish classical guitars and guitars with exotic names and unique sounds—like the oversized, bulbous bass *guitarrón* and the tenor *vihuela Mexicana*—packed up and shipped off in droves to schools across the United States—East, West, and Central.

“It is really starting to blossom. There are mariachi programs everywhere,” says Lauren Calkin, director of customer relations at West Music Mariachi, who sees what educators across the country also report—mariachi programs have increased engagement among all students. Mariachi, the beloved folk music of Mexico, is just plain fun to play, hear, and see, with its high-style charro (cowboy) outfits and acoustic wall of sound, punctuated by trumpet and full-on vocals.

For a new generation of Latino students, mariachi is a direct connection to their heritage, music their parents and grandparents grew up with. “Kids are excited about going to school; graduation rates are going up. Parents are more involved, the community is involved,” says Calkin. “Mariachi instills a sense of pride.”

In a revolution of sound and spirit, mariachi has single-handedly boosted acoustic guitar sales—at least 20 percent at West Music, the company reports—by redefining both American music education and American music culture.

In school districts across the country—from California to New York; Chicago to Houston; small-town Denison, Iowa, to Oklahoma City, Tucson, and Las Vegas—mariachi has become a standards-based mainstay, joining traditional offerings like band and orchestra.

Its rise was initially due to the realities and challenges of addressing the demographic changes in American society. According to US Census data, the Latino population has doubled over the past decade, reaching 17 percent of the population and on track to rise to 31 percent over the next five decades.

But it wasn’t just the Latino population as a whole that made educators sit up and take notice: According to Pew Research, the Latino population is the youngest ethnic group in the nation: one in five schoolchildren is of Latino origin and two-thirds of them are of Mexican descent. In 2002, Marcia M. Neel, then supervisor of the Secondary Music Education Program for the Clark County (Nevada) School District—which is the fifth-largest district in the nation and includes Las Vegas and environs—helped launch the district’s Mariachi Program, which today provides more than 5,000 students daily mariachi instruction led by upwards of 30 full-time teachers. Neel’s spot-on reaction to a US trend seen more clearly in heavily Latino Nevada was visionary, for as mariachi settled into the curriculum there and elsewhere across the nation, demographic projections took a back seat to artistry.

Neel went on to found Music Education Consultants, which promotes mariachi through the National Mariachi Workshops for Educators. It was at a Las Vegas workshop that West Music President & CEO Robin Walenta was first introduced to mariachi. “I was in awe,” she said of the music and the enthusiasm of those attending. “I thought, ‘We’ve got to get involved.’”

Shortly after, Walenta began offering scholarships to the workshops for funds-strapped music teachers, and the company also carries a line of mariachi instruments designed by Jose Hernandez, a consultant with Neel’s organization. One of the true stars of mariachi, Hernandez is a composer, conductor, and player who founded Mariachi Sol de México and also America’s first all-female professional mariachi group, Reyna de Los Angeles.

Out of the Shadows

No longer an exotic outlier, mariachi today speaks to what all musical performance seeks to engender, in the schools and beyond: joy through musicianship, for players and audience. “We are taking mariachi to its aesthetic heights,” says Daniel Sheehy of both the rise of mariachi in the schools and the growing appreciation of the music itself.

If anyone can speak to the musical and cultural artistry of mariachi, it's Sheehy, director and curator of the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage and author of *Mariachi Music in America: Experiencing Music, Expressing Culture* (Oxford University Press). Under his leadership, the center has published more than 200 recordings and won five Grammy awards, including a Latin Grammy in 2009 for the album *Amor, Dolor y Lágrimas: Música Ranchera* (Love, Pain, and Tears) from Nati Cano's ensemble, Mariachi Los Camperos de Nati Cano.

Cano, a *vihuela* player who died in 2014, is one of America's most respected mariachis, known for his work to preserve mariachi culture and a recipient of the National Heritage Fellowship of the National Endowment for the Arts, the country's highest honor in traditional arts. He also worked with Linda Ronstadt on her *Canciones de Mi Padre*, released in 1987 and still the biggest-selling, non-English album in US record history. "He was key to the mariachi movement in the United States," says Sheehy, who speaks reverently of Cano's memory and artistry.

"Something really beautiful was being excluded," Sheehy adds of the days when mariachi was maligned as nothing more than bar music, and artists like Cano were victims of discrimination—bars often posted signs that advised "No dogs, no mariachis"—which rose in part, in Sheehy's estimation, from a perception that mariachi was associated with the Chicano civil rights movement of the '60s. A trumpeter, Sheehy himself is a long-time mariachi. He founded Washington, D.C.'s first and still-performing mariachi group in 1979, Mariachi Los Amigos. He began his lifelong advocacy while studying at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), where he received his doctorate in ethnomusicology. Sheehy was asked by a student-based mariachi band to replace its departing trumpeter, Howard E. Scott, who was leaving to help found the iconic funk band War.

"Mariachi is straightforward music," says Sheehy. "It is what it is. If it's about sad emotions, it's sad. If it's happy, it's happy. From that point of view, mariachi is honest music. It speaks to people; there's not a lot of b.s."

Teaching the Teachers

Mariachi in the schools is not new, nor is the emphasis on mariachi education. The country as a whole has simply caught up with the times and the population, beyond where the music was already ingrained—the American Southwest and Southern California.

Twelve years ago, Jeff Nevin, trumpeter, composer, and author of *Virtuoso Mariachi* and the *Mariachi Mastery* sheet music series, founded the world's first mariachi degree program at Southwestern College in Chula Vista, California, where he is a professor of music and director of Mariachi Activities.

A youth mariachi in high school, Nevin is one of the country's leading advocates of mariachi education (as well as an active player and leader of San Diego's Mariachi Champaña Nevin). The degree was a solution for what he saw as a critical need: incentive for high school mariachis to continue on to college. And it serves, too, as a way to take these students the next step further: with the two-year Southwestern degree in hand, moving on to a four-year institution to study music. "We are trying to elevate mariachi music," says Nevin. His success stories include a young violinist who went on to attend Harvard University, where she founded the school's first and ongoing group Mariachi Veritas de Harvard.

A dozen years later, in the summer of 2016, Texas State University in San Marcos near Austin became one of the first universities to offer both a master’s degree and a minor in mariachi education as part of its Latin Music Studies.

“We have a saying in Texas,” says John Lopez, founder and coordinator of TSU’s Latin Music program. “Mariachi music was here before Texas became part of the United States. We didn’t cross the border, the border crossed us.”

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For Lopez, the growing recognition of mariachi’s musicality and its cultural importance translates directly into what he sought to accomplish when he arrived at the university: establish a degree pathway for aspiring mariachis. Along the way, Lopez also recognized the need—as have other educators, including Nevin and Clark County’s Neel—to “teach teachers how to teach” authentic mariachi music.

“I wanted to build an academic structure deeply rooted within the institution,” says Lopez. The work of creating the two degrees took time and also the effort to maneuver the academic system, but the numbers and the desire for the degrees were evident. “By 2013, [mariachi] had gotten so big, it justified perseverance,” says Lopez, adding that the growing interest in mariachi also brought into focus “the need to teach teachers to be better teachers. We needed to morph the degree for people who are already teaching.”

To that end, Lopez also created the means for non-academically-trained teachers to earn a state-sanctioned certificate. The certificate requires fewer academic classes, but offers a full complement of performance instruction. “We’re training people to understand the stylistic differences of mariachi,” which, Lopez says, “requires, like jazz, interpretation.

“You have to know the sound of mariachi, it has to be ‘in your ear.’ A teacher has to model the sound for students. And to do that, [he or she] has to know that sound, has to have that sound in them.”

Making a Deep Connection

Nearly 32 percent of the population of metropolitan Chicago is Latino—in overall numbers, second only to Los Angeles—and 90 percent of that total is of Mexican descent, notes Cesar Maldonado, who launched the Mariachi Heritage Foundation two years ago as a means for bringing mariachi instructors and instruments into the city’s public schools.

A Chicago native and son of Mexican immigrants, Maldonado is a successful investment banker and established the foundation in part as a means to give back to his community. But more to his point and the foundation’s mission, Maldonado is hoping the classes, certified by the Chicago Board of Education in January 2013, will help connect young Latino students to their culture and to the larger community.

“Mariachi is a connection you can’t get anywhere else,” he says. “We want students to feel good about themselves. When they feel good, when they have pride and self-esteem, they learn. “Discipline is everything in mariachi,” says Maldonado. “We treat the kids like pros. They know they get what they earn.”

Currently serving nearly 1,800 Chicago students, the 60-minute classes are held twice a week and are led by the foundation’s roster of mariachi professionals, including musical director Roberto Martinez, a vihuela player who for 32 years was a member of Mariachi Cobre.

Classes are an integrated part of the curriculum and meet Illinois music and arts standards. And while the formally structured classes are tied to national Common Core standards, Maldonado has added a specific focus: literacy, “reading, writing, critical thinking.”

“My parents didn’t speak English, and it made them feel inferior to the system,” Maldonado says, noting that many of the new generation of students in Chicago schools live in similar households. “Mexican youth face an achievement gap because of language.”

Looking ahead, Maldonado expects that within ten years, students from the foundation’s classes “will be in some of the best university and colleges. Opportunities are going to open up because of mariachi.”

For now, he’s excited about the latest opportunity for his young mariachis, a fundraising project sponsored by Pepsi—an album produced by mariachi idol Jose Hernandez.



How to play the Mariachi guitar

Angel Humberto Duran grew up in Nogales, Arizona, a small city that shares the US–Mexico border with its much larger neighbor, Nogales in the Mexican state of Sonora. Along with many of his friends and classmates, Duran played mariachi—and he still does. But today Duran is also studying

classical guitar at the renowned Bolton Guitar Studies program at the University of Arizona in Tucson.

“Mariachi was originally folk music,” says Duran, a junior. “It was never education-based. It was people just trying to make music.”

Now, young music students like Duran are wondering if mariachi really is just folk music. “We have people like Jose Hernandez, a master in composition and arrangement,” Duran says of the long-honored, Grammy-nominated founder of Mariachi Sol de México. “When you hear his arrangements, they sound so modern . . . [and] he incorporates classical music.

“Mariachi has definitely changed,” says Duran. “It has become more pedagogical, and that’s a great thing. It’s keeping the music alive.”

Interested in giving mariachi a try? Duran has a few tips—beginning with the caveat: “People tend to underestimate mariachi, like it’s an easy style. To the contrary.”

DO NOT PRACTICE ON AN EXPENSIVE GUITAR

The mariachi guitar plays a percussive role in the ensemble, much like the rhythm section in a jazz band, notes Duran. And, because a typical ensemble features a blaring trumpet, high-energy violins, and full-on vocals, guitars are played vigorously and as loud as acoustically possible. If you’re playing correctly, “it’s almost like you’re beating up the guitar, and you are,” he says. “You can easily put a hole in it.” Pickguards are a necessity for the serious mariachi. Also note: Mariachi guitars are played with a pick.

KNOW YOUR INSTRUMENTS

The oversized, rounded guitarrón is the “heart of mariachi,” says Duran. “Without it, no group.” The vihuela mexicana, with five strings, is an octave higher than a guitar.

DON’T THINK YOU CAN SIGHT READ AND COME OUT SWINGING

Mariachi scores “look like a bunch of rhythms, almost like drum music,” says Duran. And unless you’ve listened intently to the pros, you won’t be able to differentiate between the notes as written and how they’re actually played. Sixteenth notes, for instance: They can be either “dragged or rushed,” says Duran, depending on the song, and are sometimes played interchangeably in the same tune.

LISTEN, LISTEN, LISTEN

In the past, listening was the only way to learn mariachi—and Duran urges any newcomer to listen to Jose Hernandez and also Mariachi Vargas de Tecalitlán before taking the mariachi plunge. An ensemble founded in 1897 by Gaspar Vargas, Mariachi Vargas is globally celebrated not only for its artistry but also as the keeper of the genre’s musical roots.

“Listening to Mariachi Vargas is a standard for anyone playing mariachi,” says Duran. Dissect the music, watch the players on YouTube, “especially for the strumming patterns,” he advises. “Get together with someone to figure out rhythms. And listen to the guitarrón. It’s your guide.”



Mariachi and Spanish speaking English learners: District initiatives, models, and education policy

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ABSTRACT

Districts nationwide are challenged with how best to address the needs of an increasing number of non-English or limited-English speaking students. These young people are similarly challenged as they face new environs, unfamiliar cultural settings, and significant communication issues. Findings have indicated that an arts-rich education can assist limited English speakers, many of them considered to be at-risk students, to achieve at higher levels. This article examines a number of districts with growing Hispanic populations that have implemented standards-based mariachi programs and found success in engaging Spanish speaking English learners, their parents, and the Hispanic community at large in the process. Some of these districts had considerable issues needing to be resolved but innovative solutions have led to student success. One district that serves as a model to be replicated is chronicled in detail due to how its creative program implementation subsequently informed policy. School climate data is also provided by another district, which broke down its reporting according to subgroup. Although the data do not measure only those who were enrolled solely in mariachi courses, the major findings are significant in that they indicate how music coursework impacts Latino students specifically. The impact of participating as an active music-maker in any ensemble by any participant cannot be overlooked, but for Spanish speaking English learners, the standards-based mariachi program provides a culturally familiar and welcoming setting, facilitates new patterns of learning, and addresses the priority of attaining English language proficiency.

KEYWORDS

English language learners;
mariachi; mariachi education

The priority of attaining English language proficiency

English learners (ELs) in the United States number approximately 5 million—approximately 1 out of every 10 public school students—with Spanish being the primary language for the majority (Sanchez, 2017). In finding ways in which arts education, the education of English learners, and education policy might intersect, it is not only important to explore the specific intersection, but it is also vital to discover where the construction zones might exist so that the most expedient pathways may be plotted. In December 2015, President Obama signed into law the bipartisan Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015) thereby reauthorizing the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) originally signed into law by President Johnson in April 1965. The new and revised provisions of ESSA are already serving as catalysts for change in districts nationwide as English-language educators are now in the process of determining how to address these policies while music educators

are contemplating the opportunities that may be provided to serve more students through the various provisions within the law—notably, the Well-Rounded Education Provision. Because this new law will have a significant impact on English learner programs, the Council of Chief State School Officers has published an online resource document (CCSSO, 2016) to assist state superintendents of public instruction in digesting the intent of the various provisions as they pertain to English language proficiency. That document provides a comprehensive overview of the specific provisions most relevant to the education of English learners as well as the potential challenges for states. To set a backdrop for this article, several of the more applicable ESSA provisions are explained below.

1. Replacing the controversial No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), ESSA now authorizes states to create their own accountability systems—a major change from the long shadow that NCLB cast across the education landscape. Even though states now

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have the flexibility to develop their own policies to address academic proficiency, English language proficiency, and graduation rates, they are also required to include long term goals and annual indicators for all students, including all student subgroups. This replaces that which was previously found in NCLB's "adequate yearly progress" provisions. Subgroups are defined as those who are economically disadvantaged, students from major ethnic and racial groups, children with disabilities, and ELs.

2. States must demonstrate in their Title I plans that they have adopted English Language Proficiency (ELP) Standards rooted in the four recognized domains of speaking, listening, reading, and writing; that address the different proficiency levels of ELs; and that are also aligned with the state's academic standards. This is similar to what was in Title III of the previous law, although the previous version did not require that the ELPs address the different proficiency levels of ELs. NCLB merely required a single definition of proficiency rather than defining multiple levels as is the case with ESSA.
3. Title III of ESSA, which addresses language instruction for ELs and immigrant students specifically, sets forth its purposes as follows: (a) to help English learners attain proficiency and academic success in English, (b) to assist English learners to achieve at high levels in their academic subjects in order to meet the same State standards as all other learners, (c) to help the education community provide effective instructional programs designed to assist English learners, (d) to help English learners enter all-English instructional settings, and (e) to promote language instruction to the families of English learners as well as to the community.
4. ESSA contains a provision that all students should be provided with a well-rounded education, which is defined as courses, activities, and programming in subjects such as English, reading or language arts, writing, science, technology, engineering, mathematics, foreign languages, civics and government, economics, arts, history, geography, computer science, **music**, career and technical education, health, physical education, and any other subject, as determined by the State or local educational agency, with the purpose of providing all students access to an enriched curriculum and educational experience.

With states now moving forward to develop their own policies and assessments to align with the new ESSA requirements, identifying arts instruction models that support literacy, while also serving as an expression of personal and cultural identity, is an important goal. Because the Latino demographic is the largest and fastest growing minority and because this particular student population is among the lowest performing, music

programs that serve this specific subgroup could be a significant factor when it comes to the success of ELs in achieving English language proficiency. If this is the case, districts may want to explore how these two programs could align with the goal of instituting policy that could result in embedding music education into the curriculum even more firmly. In addition to informing policy, it is worth considering that such a program may also lead to the establishment of a vision for the entire Latino community both in and outside of the school setting.

Although the teaching of any art form is crucial because of its intrinsic value, it is worth exploring if districts with comprehensive music programs and, more specifically, standards-based mariachi programs that provide culturally relevant experiences for Latino students, are also serving as an effective intervention for those ELs who are just beginning to embark on a cultural shift that will impact their lives forever.

The possibilities resulting from ESSA

With such an increased emphasis on the academic achievement of ELs, ESSA could result in such added pressure for districts to meet the new state policies that opportunities for Latino students to participate in arts electives might be substantially reduced or even eliminated altogether.

However, with the requirement that state ELP Standards stem from the four recognized domains of speaking, listening, reading, and writing, the mariachi classroom could serve to support the development of these domains for Latino ELs as these are also the components of the quality mariachi curriculum by way of singing and listening, in addition to reading and composing music. Combined with the above referenced purposes of Title III, in addition to the well-rounded education provision that specifies music as one of such courses, mariachi programs could be poised to serve as a bridge to college, career, and for many, a pathway to citizenry.

Equal access for the burgeoning Latino demographic

The future of our nation is inextricably linked to the future of the Hispanic community—Hispanics are the largest and fastest growing minority group, and will represent 60% of our nation's population growth between 2005 and 2050. However, Hispanics have the lowest education attainment levels of any group in the United States. (White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for Hispanics, 2017)

With an increasing number of Latino students, and with as many as 32% of those under 18 living in poverty

(Barmer et al., 2015), the chances that they will have access to the same quality of arts education program is questionable. In general, the arts opportunity gap seems to widen significantly between schools of highest and lowest poverty rates but more specifically, the opportunities provided for ELs are even fewer as these students are also impacted by curriculum crowding due to the additional requirements which may be necessary in acquiring a new language. In his groundbreaking report, “The Arts and Achievement in At-Risk Youth: Findings from Four Longitudinal Studies,” James S. Catterall presents findings indicating that it is precisely an arts-rich education that helps these at-risk students, many of them limited English speakers, to achieve at a higher level. They have a higher grade point average (GPA), show higher test scores in science and writing, and are three times as likely to receive a college degree while earning A’s predominantly (Catterall, Dumais, & Hampden-Thompson, 2012).

The Multilingual Pathways Department in the San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD) champions this finding through its mission, which states first and foremost that their goal is to provide ELs with a “culturally and linguistically relevant education” (San Francisco Unified School District, 2017). Mariachi education can clearly serve to provide this type of education so it follows that the SFUSD has subsequently developed and instituted an articulated, in-school comprehensive mariachi program rooted in a standards-based curriculum.

In his opening remarks for the 2014 White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for Hispanics’ National Arts Forum at Pixar Studios, Richard Carranza, former SFUSD superintendent, told more than 150 invited national-level decision makers that, “If you capture their interest, their intellect, commitment, and minds will follow” (White House Initiative on Educational Excellence, 2015). Carranza, who did not speak English when he started school in Tucson, Arizona, discovered this firsthand when serving as the mariachi teacher at Pueblo Magnet High School. His nationally recognized mariachi program produced a 90% high school graduation rate and instilled students with a passion for music-making that lifted them to new heights of fulfillment and the self-realization that ultimate success in all things was within their grasp and even more importantly, within *their* power to attain.

What the numbers tell us: Why teach mariachi as opposed to other forms of Latin music?

In the 2010 *Census Brief*, a number of findings were articulated that are relevant when considering why mariachi, as opposed to other forms of Latin music, would be an appropriate choice to introduce into the school

curriculum. In the years from 2000 to 2010, the percentage of the population that self-identified as Hispanic or Latino grew from 35.3 million to 50.5 million. Of those who self-identified as Hispanic or Latino, it was the Mexican population that accounted for approximately three quarters of the 15.2 million increase during this same period. The vast majority (63%) of Latinos in the United States are thus of Mexican descent with a median age of 27. This is considerably younger than 37 years of age which is the median age of the general U.S. population—thus the increased likelihood of child-bearing, which could account for some of the increase of school-aged children of Mexican descent (Albert, Ennis, & Rio-Vargas, 2011).

With 69% of current Latino students identified as being of Mexican origin and with growth indicators estimating an increase of 166% in this sub-group by 2050, it follows that local education agencies could engage these children by recognizing and honoring their cultural traditions.

It is thus mariachi, a form of folk music that is immediately identified as a national symbol that encompasses the essence of Mexico, that could be the most impactful component of the arts education program when providing a curriculum that embraces culturally responsive and relevant teaching.

Embracing mariachi education through policy: The CCSD’s story

The Clark County School District (CCSD)’s comprehensive Mariachi Education Program has become the nation’s largest with a total enrollment of approximately 5,000 middle and high students taking mariachi classes daily during the 2015–16 school year. In the formative years, district and community leaders who envisioned a program that would eventually serve the cultural needs of the CCSD’s growing population of Latino students worked together using a longitudinal approach rooted in a well-thought-out design as to lay the groundwork strategically. Exploring the various program components to formally articulate why the program was being created was the focus as well as to answer questions such as: how the program would be implemented, what the district would support financially, what community partnerships could be forged, and what achievements would be realized.

The why

The CCSD Secondary Mariachi Education Program was introduced into four high schools and four middle schools in the 2002–2003 school year with the goal of providing:

- Increased academic achievement by requiring specific GPA targets for performance participation
- Increased student attendance
- Increased parent participation
- Increased self-esteem and self-confidence
- Positive social citizenry through performance
- Increased student enrollment in music education courses
- Increased opportunities to represent the CCSD and Las Vegas community as music ambassadors through high-level performances
- A strengthened and culturally diversified fine arts department focus
- Opportunities for students to serve as positive peer role models. (Neel & Trujillo, 2008)

The how

Early on, it was decided that the district would only hire educators who were steeped in the mariachi genre. It did not take long to realize that those who had the most experience, and thus were the best qualified to teach mariachi, were not certified music educators but professional mariachi musicians. Many districts hire non-certified mariachi musicians as para-professionals rather than securing other alternatives, but the CCSD chose to explore the possibility of creating a new license that would allow for these preferred applicants to attain professional certification. It was important that they establish themselves as full-fledged music educators with the same benefits as any other teacher in the district. In this way, the mariachi program would exist on equal footing with other music electives.

In a meeting with one of the CCSD assistant superintendents, it was decided to make a request of the Nevada State Department of Education to provide an Ethnic Music endorsement within the Vocational Business and Industry (B&I) category of teacher licensing. The B&I category is used when licensing professionals from the business industry to work within the school district because they are considered experts in a specific area of expertise. Thus, the prospective mariachi educators would leave their professional mariachi performance careers to become credentialed mariachi educators. To qualify for this license, these candidates needed to have earned a minimum of a high school diploma or its equivalent and have at least five years of successful performance experience after age 16 in a professional mariachi ensemble (setting).

The commitment

Established in the fall of 2002, the CCSD chose to implement the mariachi program side-by-side with the existing instrumental and vocal curriculum. This was

significant in that by offering the course through the policies already established for the more traditional music course offerings, the district affirmed that the comprehensive, standards-based, sequential mariachi curriculum contained the same academic rigor as other courses of study in music. The district thus put their full support and resources behind the Secondary Mariachi Education Program by providing the following:

- A standards-based, sequential set of course syllabi for six mariachi courses offered to students in grades 6–12
- Commensurate course credit for all mariachi coursework
- An Equipment Standards List so that each school choosing to offer the mariachi program would have access to the same numbers of instruments, equipment and supplies for participating students
- Professional development opportunities for the mariachi faculty
- A district-wide Mariachi Festival where ensembles could perform for critical assessment
- A district-wide Mariachi Honor Ensemble where the more exceptional students may audition to participate and subsequently develop and showcase their talents by working under the direction of a highly regarded professional mariachi educator/performer
- A Summer Mariachi Institute for students interested in pursuing music study over the summer months

The partners

Once it was determined that a mariachi program would be implemented, the district reached out to potential partner organizations that might want to become involved and the response was formidable. The Latin Chamber of Commerce, local performing arts organizations, and a number of local and national foundations stepped up and provided support because they understood that this program could be a turning point for engaging more Latino students, their parents, extended families, and even the local Latino community in public school education.

The significant gains

As was anticipated, the implementation of the mariachi program resulted in positive breakthroughs in a number of areas. The program indeed met the goal of engaging increased numbers of Latino students. The program has grown 20-fold since its inception in the 2002–2003 school year.

CCSD mariachi educators report that their students demonstrate a high rate of school attendance because they simply do not want to miss out on the enjoyment of music-making each day. This has resulted in students attending all of their classes more regularly, thus leading to increased levels of achievement by nature of the fact that they are attending school more often. In the case of the CCSD, most mariachi educators also have self-imposed performance expectations that require a specific GPA in order for students to perform and this stipulation has also resulted in significant academic gains for participating students.

The district's mariachi educators also report that their programs experience a high level of retention over the long term, thus leading to the vast majority of participating students eventually graduating from high school on time.

What CCSD administrators came to discover about mariachi and bilingualism

Although they may not at first understand how the mariachi program might engage Latino students and their families so significantly, administrators soon discover how music in a bilingual setting can expedite English language acquisition skills.

1. Mariachi programs themselves are largely bilingual in that teachers and students converse primarily in English and Spanish. The songs are in Spanish inherently and in the case of the CCSD, most of the mariachi teachers are bilingual so they thus serve as effective role models for the students. Instruction is delivered primarily in English to students who for the most part, are bilingual or native Spanish-speakers. ELs thus find themselves “at home” in a culturally relevant setting while being immersed in the English language.
2. Spanish is spoken when referring to the music itself because of its specific terminology. Students soon begin to equate Spanish words that are part of the mariachi terminology with corresponding words in English. For example, the Spanish word “*entrada*” (lit. entrance) refers to the instrumental introduction of the song in mariachi terminology. The Spanish word “*golpe*” (lit. to strike/hit) refers to a crisp strum on the guitar and vihuela, which is a characteristic articulation in a number of mariachi styles. Students thus demonstrate their understanding through repeated practice and playing.
3. Social bonding quickly develops between students who are newly enrolled in the school and those who may have gone through similar experiences in the not-too-distant past. These relationships serve to provide assistance and even

comfort in times of need. For example, one student may lean over to another during rehearsal to speak a few words in Spanish to clarify the instructions being delivered in English. Peer coaching in this manner links one student to the other and results in establishing a culture of trust through meaningful relationships.

4. Mariachi music transcends generations in the Mexican culture. Children grow up hearing these songs during their formative years and the melodies become ingrained as aural representations of home. It also provides common ground within the family. Many students share the similar story of how they thought that mariachi was “old peoples’ music” until they started learning it at school. It then transcended from its former status to music they love to sing, play, and perform with their peers. Students form their own groups outside of the school day and perform for a variety of celebrations. Mariachi honors the heritage of the Latino culture and promotes collaboration and understanding.
5. CCSD principals report an increase in involvement of the Latino parents and other family members including siblings of participants who are also enrolled in the same school as their performing brothers and sisters. Entire extended families attend concerts, even singing along with the students during the performances and making traditional food to sell at the concert events to help with fundraising. Principals also report that this increased activity continues to target the vision of helping parents, families, and the local business and residential community to view the school as more relevant and culturally friendly.

Several school districts have chosen to introduce their mariachi programs at the end of the school day using 21st Century Learning Center grants to fund the expense. Although this is certainly another option for engaging more Latino students in music-making, the preferred implementation model would be to implement the program into the regular school day through policy that provides a standards-based curriculum as was done in the CCSD. In this way, the program is viewed as rigorous academic content deserving of curricular placement and secure funding.

Mariachi programs can address a landscape of educational initiatives

Barrow County Schools, GA

Service learning

Defined by the National Youth Leadership Council, Service Learning is “an approach to teaching and learning

in which students use academic knowledge and skills to address genuine community needs” (NYLC, 2017). Kerry Bryant, former mariachi workshop attendee and Fine Arts coordinator from Barrow County, GA, who implemented such a program, wrote in a subsequent article that the school based mariachi program is infused with this strategy. (Bryant & Neel, 2011)

The Mariachi program ... uses the students-teaching-students model. ... When we started in 2009, we enlisted the help of one violin student, one trumpet student, and one guitar student with prior experience and playing ability to help with instruction. All of our high school Mariachi students will eventually do lecture/demo concerts at the middle and elementary feeder schools with the entire program being organized and presented by the participants themselves. They will cover Mariachi history and performance techniques, as well as perform representative music from the genre. This is the students-teaching-students model at its finest. (p. 25)

Hillsboro School District, OR

K–12 dual language program

Representing the complete opposite side of the country is Dan Bosshardt from the Hillsboro (OR) School District (HSD). In June, 2014, the Hillsboro School Board approved a mariachi course highlighting the fact that “a mariachi course would provide an excellent elective option for the arts for dual language students” (Bosshardt & Reiman, 2014, p. 45).

International Baccalaureate® program

The HSD board further identified how the in-school mariachi program would also address the curriculum of the Middle Years Program and IB Diploma:

Middle years program (International Baccalaureate)

From the earliest times, artistic expression has been common to all cultures as human beings make statements through a variety of nonverbal forms and create objects that are aesthetically pleasing. Beyond barriers of language, the discovery of the cultural values of civilizations through their artistic production is one of the best ways to promote international understanding.

Students are brought into contact with the art forms and aesthetic values of other cultures, as well as their own, and are helped to develop perceptions between ideas and art. They are also encouraged to identify particular creative abilities and to master techniques appropriate to that form of expression.

In addition, the course:

- Organizes learning around the creative cycle—a dynamic, ongoing process of sensing, planning,

creating, and evaluating art, and one in which all the senses are involved

- Encourages creative energy, communication, interaction, and reflection
- Aims to help the student become a developing artist—one who is able to assess the level of skill and target the areas that need development
- Seeks to acquaint young people with the creations of men and women whose works have proved to be of enduring worth.

IB Diploma (International Baccalaureate®)

The Diploma Programme prepares students for effective participation in a rapidly evolving and increasingly global society as they:

- Study at least two languages and increase understanding of cultures, including their own
- Make connections across traditional academic disciplines and explore the nature of knowledge through the program’s unique theory of knowledge course
- Enhance their personal and interpersonal development through creativity, action and service

Group 6 of the International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme includes the following subjects: dance, music, film, theatre, and visual arts. These subjects allow a high degree of adaptability to different cultural contexts. The emphasis is on creativity in the context of disciplined, practical research into the relevant genres. In addition, each subject is designed to foster critical, reflective and informed practice, help students understand the dynamic and changing nature of the arts, explore the diversity of art across time, place and culture, and express themselves with confidence and competence. (Bosshardt & Reiman, 2014, p. 45)

San Francisco Unified School District, CA

Mariachi and the core music standards

The mariachi program of the SFUSD has developed a standards-based approach built on all four of the artistic processes of Creating (Cr), Performing (Pr), Responding (Re), and Connecting (Cn). Although still in its infancy, the district is writing a curriculum based on California’s Core Music Standards that provides assessable instructional goals with the overall objective of creating arts literacy. Below are examples of how each of these processes could be explored in the beginning level mariachi course.

INSTRUCTIONAL GOAL: To recognize form in simple mariachi performance styles

1.1 The student will identify the ranchera lenta style.

ASSESSMENT ACTIVITY 1 (Cr): Ask students to compose a simple song in the style of the ranchera lenta using the I, IV, and V chords of Re (D) Major.

ASSESSMENT ACTIVITY 2 (Pr): Have students perform a selection representative of the ranchera lenta style and demonstrate the appropriate characteristic elements.

ASSESSMENT ACTIVITY 3 (Re plus Technology): Have students listen to or view on YouTube at least three different performances of the same ranchera lenta song then describe the various differences/nuances in the performances using appropriate terminology. Ask students to choose their favorite performance from among those observed then provide the reason for their choice.

ASSESSMENT ACTIVITY 4 (Cn): Have students explain—either in writing or using essential questions—the origin of the ranchera lenta style, the characteristic elements of the style and its significance in the mariachi genre.

Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools' Music Makes Us[®] program: Measuring significant gains

When considering whether music education can play a significant role for Latino students and result in measurable social and academic gains, one has only to look to the Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools' (MNPS) *Music Makes Us[®]* program, a joint effort of the school district, the mayor's office and music industry and community leaders. MNPS implemented their mariachi program in the fall of 2012.

MNPS commissioned a comprehensive research project subsequently published in 2013. The "Prelude Music Makes Us Baseline Research Report" (Eason & Johnson, 2013) was compiled to establish a benchmark—a snapshot of students who have been enrolled in middle and high school music and the impact of music study on student engagement and academic achievement.

A set of established questions was examined that would guide researchers Becky J. A. Eason, Ph. and Christopher M. Johnson, PhD, both from the University of Kansas, to better understand the potential effects and implications of music-making:

1. What relationships exist among music participation, student characteristics, student engagement, and academic achievement?
2. To what extent does music participation affect school motivation and engagement?
3. To what extent does music participation affect academic achievement?
4. To what extent does music participation affect students identify and social structures?
5. To what extent do students make connections between music and other areas of school and life?

Four years of quantitative statistical data was collected on the 6,006 high school seniors from the class of 2012 and included non-music students as well as music students. Analysis determined differences in student engagement and achievement by music participation level, gender, and ethnicity, although for purposes of this article, only participation level and ethnicity findings are presented. Qualitative data collection included surveys of

music students and focus group sessions that were conducted and comprised strictly of music students.

Although the data do not measure only those who were enrolled solely in mariachi courses, the major findings presented below are significant in that they indicate how music coursework impacts Latino students specifically. These findings are organized by key variables and are grouped into three categories by music participation level: students who took no music classes, students who took music for one year or less, and students who took music for more than one year.

Of the 6,006 members of the MNPS class of 2012, 35% took at least one music class while in high school. That course would have fulfilled the 1-year fine arts requirement in MNPS schools and may account for the fact that approximately half of music students took the one-year minimum requirement or less.

Figure 1 indicates that fewer Latino students participated in music courses than did other samplings.

Figure 2 shows that the attendance of Latino students who took at least one year or less of music coursework was commensurate with other ethnicities in that they attended school 91% of the time while those taking more than one year attended school at a rate of 93%. In a school year made up of 180 days, that adds up to a difference of 11 school days—more than two weeks of classes.

Figure 3 indicates that across all student groups, those with increased participation levels in music had fewer referrals.

Figure 4 illustrates that across all student groups, those with the highest level of music participation also earned the highest GPAs.

On-time graduation rates by ethnicity are shown in Figure 5. The increase in on-time graduation rate was the greatest for Latino students. This difference means that Latino high school students who exceed the district's fine arts requirement by taking more than 1 year of music are 71% more likely to graduate on time than their Latino peers with no music experience.

Figure 6 illustrates that African American, White, and Latino students with higher level of music participation

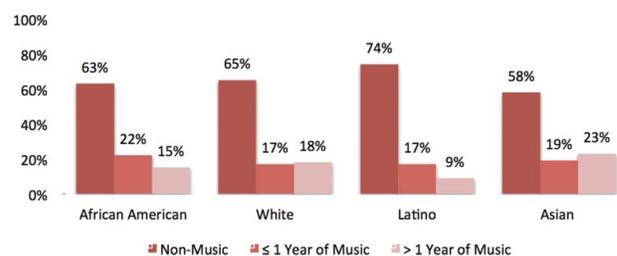


Figure 1. Music participation rates by ethnicity, $N = 5,984$. From Eason and Johnson (2013, p. 18). © Music Makes Us. Reproduced by permission.

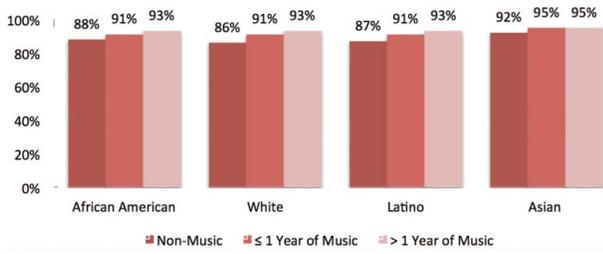


Figure 2. School attendance rates by ethnicity, $N = 5,742$. From Eason and Johnson (2013, p. 19). © Music Makes Us. Reproduced by permission.

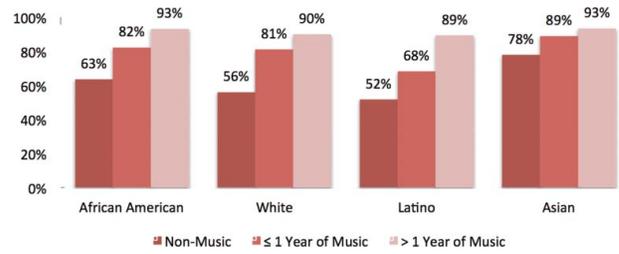


Figure 5. On-time graduation rates by ethnicity, $N = 4,994$. From Eason and Johnson (2013, p. 23). © Music Makes Us. Reproduced by permission.

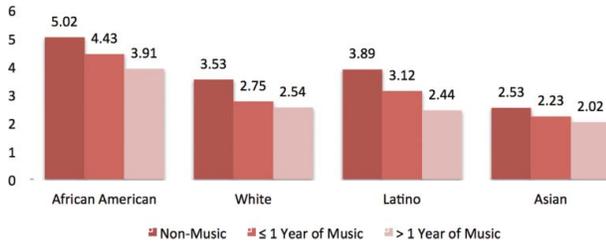


Figure 3. Discipline referrals by ethnicity, $N = 4,490$. From Eason and Johnson (2013, p. 20). © Music Makes Us. Reproduced by permission.

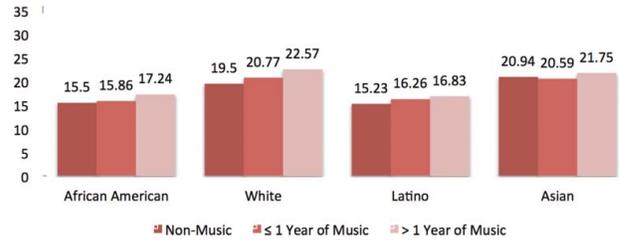


Figure 6. ACT Scores in English, $N = 3,461$. From Eason and Johnson (2013, p. 24). © Music Makes Us. Reproduced by permission.

levels all scored higher on the ACTs in English. ACT scores in math are shown in Figure 7. African American, White, and Latino students with higher levels of music participation all scored higher.

In general, the differences across the three categories represented above show substantial differences between students who took no music classes, those who took classes for one year or less and those who took more than one year of music. Although several limitations have been noted in this report, the authors still concluded that “there is sufficient compelling evidence to suggest that higher levels of music participation are predictive of statistically significant positive benefits for student engagement and learning” (p. 31). This reinforces the assertion that across all student groups, music participation has a meaningful impact on student engagement and learning. There were varying rates of achievement between

students from different ethnicities but in every case and by every measure, Latino students who participated in more music study also experienced increased levels of success in the Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools.

Implications

The implications are considerable but of the school districts that have implemented mariachi programs into their comprehensive music curriculum through established policy, many have still had to grapple with several common issues.

Legitimacy of the genre

First and foremost is that mariachi itself must be recognized as a legitimate genre worthy of study. It should stand shoulder to shoulder with the more standard

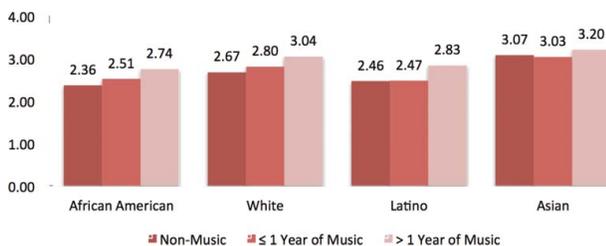


Figure 4. Grade point average by ethnicity, $N = 4,119$. From Eason and Johnson (2013, p. 22). © Music Makes Us. Reproduced by permission.

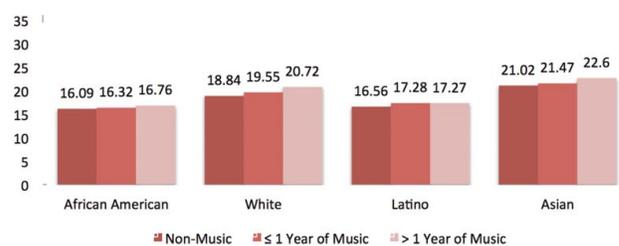


Figure 7. ACT Scores in Math, $N = 3,462$. From Eason and Johnson (2013, p. 24). © Music Makes Us. Reproduced by permission.

courses found in the typical school music program—band, orchestra, choir, guitar, and so on. Unfortunately, the common perception is that mariachi is what is heard being performed (out of tune) at the local Mexican restaurant. To be recognized as such, it is important to understand that similar to the origins of the jazz idiom, the mariachi genre has developed from a small group of musicians playing music considered to be representative of their culture into a finely tuned ensemble defined by a specific instrumentation playing in a variety of styles that are immediately recognizable by its extroverted, expressive, and exciting characteristic sound.

Finding qualified educators

The number of mariachi programs starting annually is growing exponentially and districts need to find a way to accommodate this growth. Texas State University in San Marcos offers a Mariachi Teaching Certificate within the music education program but in general, mariachi programs at universities exist as clubs rather than as curriculum. The dilemma is that until increased numbers of high school mariachi students seek to pursue this type of study, the postsecondary institutions will not offer it and yet until the universities make this type of program available, students cannot seek it.

For the more immediate future, it thus falls to the practicing music educator to learn more about this genre of performance and not fear delving into a new realm of music-making. Ruben Newell, band and now mariachi educator from Denison, Iowa, described his preconceived notions about mariachi by asking readers of *The Iowa Bandmaster*:²²

What do you know about mariachi? Maybe I should ask that in a different way: what do you think you know about mariachi? If you are like I was 2 years ago, you think you know what mariachi is. If you are also like I was 1 years ago, you are probably wrong.

He fully credits mariachi with giving him some of the most rewarding moments of his entire teaching career. Professional development workshops are the most efficient method to provide licensed music educators with the training to implement new programs. Another option is to research whether alternative licensing may be possible where a local mariachi performing artist, properly vetted, could be brought on staff at least to start the program under the supervision of a properly licensed educator.

Non-Latino music educators are often concerned about how the Latino community will respond to them teaching mariachi. In other words, should mariachi only be taught by Latino teachers or those who speak Spanish

fluently? In each situation where this has been the case, the Latino community has been thrilled to learn that a mariachi program is being offered, thereby recognizing their culture and making it available to their children so this is a non-issue.

Through its Music Education Center of America (MECA) Continuing Education Program, VanderCook College of Music partners with Music Education Consultants, Inc., to offer the *National Mariachi Workshops for Educators*[®] in Las Vegas, for teachers seeking practical knowledge and skills that can be used in developing a mariachi program. This 1-week event prepares music educators to offer mariachi programs in their home districts or to enhance the programs that have already been established.

During the week, participants take “instrumental methods” mini-classes to learn how to play guitarrón and vihuela, the two characteristic instruments of the mariachi ensemble. Classes on guitar, violin, trumpet, and voice are made available to brush up on skills that may be out of practice. The highly successful CCSD mariachi educators serve as the instructors for these workshops and over the week, participants are introduced to mariachi methods books, musical arrangements, an assortment of classroom support materials, and successful strategies for teaching this genre of music. Maestro José Hernández, Grammy-nominated professional mariachi performing artist, teaches classes on the nuances of the various performance styles. Workshops are centered on helping teachers to develop their pedagogical skills and are offered at three levels—Beginning, Intermediate, and Advanced Pedagogy—to best accommodate the individual needs of the programs of those who are in attendance. Over the 10 years of providing this professional development resource, participants like those from SFUSD, MNPS, Barrow County, GA, and Denison, IA have continued to return year after year and describe in great detail how the mariachi programs they subsequently developed in their home districts evolved to encompass additional learning strategies.

Standards-based curricular materials

Compared with the more traditional offerings, there are far fewer examples of standards-based mariachi curriculum to use as models and finding appropriate teaching materials can also be a challenge since there are a limited number of methods books and published arrangements. Recognized publishers have recognized the void and are now responding to the need. In addition to these materials, there exists a ready-to-serve network of mariachi educators who help each other when it comes to sharing resources.

The effect of the mariachi program on traditional music programs

Initially, there were concerns about how this program would impact the traditional music programs—that is, band, choir, orchestra and even guitar—but over time, it has been noted that the vast majority of those students who chose to enroll in mariachi programs were students who were not participating in the music education program prior to signing up for mariachi. Similar to the guitar movement, mariachi *adds* to the number of students involved in music-making. In other words, these are not students who were taken from other music courses. These are students who are new to music education and in most cases, new to the entire concept of school engagement. The students who choose to participate in mariachi are often the “invisible” students who long to be involved in something at school that speaks to them personally but have yet to discover that opportunity.

“Maria’s” story: A vignette and personal story

In the spring of 2003, I found myself in the front seat of a school bus riding from the Reno-Tahoe International Airport to the Nevada state capital of Carson City. It was Arts Advocacy Day in the legislature and as the Clark County School District’s (Las Vegas) coordinator of Secondary Fine Arts, it was my privilege to accompany 12 mariachi students and their director from Rancho High School to the Arts Advocacy Luncheon where they were scheduled to perform for Nevada’s arts advocates and members of the state legislature. We had all flown together from Las Vegas that morning and in that short, 1-hour flight, the majority of the students experienced their very first encounter with air travel. On the trip to Carson City, I was inspired by a young girl (we will call her “*Maria*”) who described her experiences with mariachi at her school. The CCSD had implemented the standards-based, in-school mariachi program that previous fall and she effervesced as she explained how her extended family was so happy that she was playing such a variety of traditional mariachi songs that they knew and how, on a personal level, this particular genre of music had become so rewarding for her to learn and perform.

As she spoke so passionately, the idea popped into my head that in addition to the ensemble’s performance, it would be wonderful if *Maria* could also impart her passion for her mariachi program to the arts advocates and legislators who would be in attendance at the luncheon. If they could just hear her speak with this same enthusiasm, then surely the performance will have served a dual purpose—not only to *perform* but also to *inform* and there is no better way to inform others about the benefits

of music education than to hear it directly from the students, especially in the way that I just knew that *Maria* could deliver.

I shared my idea with *Maria* and she grinned from ear to ear. She was thrilled to have been given the honor of providing remarks to this august body but she then asked, “What should I tell them?” Of course, I told her to simply speak from the heart—to just share with them what she had shared with me. With about 20 minutes left on our bus trip, *Maria* suddenly fell silent. Her hands came up on the seatback in front of her and her head dropped down onto the back of her hands. It was a bit disconcerting so I asked if she was feeling well and she glanced up and told me that she was getting scared and that she did not think that she could go through with it. I was stunned! Within a matter of just a few minutes, she had gone from sparkling to limp. Looking straight into her eyes, I reminded her that all she had to do was speak from her heart, hoping that this would help bolster her sudden change in disposition.

We arrived at the venue and the students scurried around the room tuning their instruments and setting up for the performance. The time was drawing near and I noticed that once *Maria* started warming up she “came back” as evidenced by the shy smile that came across her face when I gave her a thumbs up. The luncheon attendees starting filing in and before long, the program began. Rancho High School’s Mariachi de Oro was introduced and they got underway with their performance. Just before the final selection, *Maria* walked up to the microphone and I held my breath. She smiled and the room lit up as she began to speak in her soft-spoken, respectful manner. She thanked everyone for coming and expressed how much of an honor that it was for Mariachi de Oro to have been invited to perform.

Then it happened! The next words out of her mouth were completely unanticipated. She explained how much she loved playing mariachi music and that it had made a huge impact on her personally because “last year, I didn’t come to school very often and I had bad grades but this year, I haven’t missed one day and I have a 3.5 GPA.” The room erupted! In one sentence, she had said it all! What was the value of the mariachi program for this young Latina? It was changing her life and I was watching it unfold right in front me as she spoke to our state’s decision makers.

After their final selection, the students received a standing ovation, then took their places at their assigned luncheon tables so that they could now enjoy a well-deserved, deliciously prepared meal while the program proceeded but at its conclusion, another surprising turn of events occurred. After the proper acknowledgments were delivered by the emcee, the legislators surrounded

the students' tables and began introducing themselves and telling the young musicians how inspired they were by the performance. We were astounded to say the least. Here were the arts advocates from Nevada's major arts organizations all in one room but Nevada's legislators chose to spend their time visiting with and getting to know our mariachi students.

The day ended with another performance at a reception hosted in the governor's mansion, then a quick trip back to the airport to fly back to Las Vegas, but not without a major shift in perception and understanding on everyone's part. The students' experiences were considerable—everything from flying on a plane for the first time to attending a formal luncheon to performing in the governor's mansion! Those who heard the performance learned about the potential significance of this “new” music program that celebrates the culture of our state's largest burgeoning demographic and imagined how this program might even serve as a lifeboat for many other of Nevada's other young Latinos.

Finally, *Maria* learned a great deal about herself. She actually could “stand and deliver” but even more than that, she discovered that it was the mariachi music itself that was her turning point—not only that it served as her opportunity to realize and be proud of her cultural heritage as well as her musical accomplishments but also to realize that she was a young lady with a bright and promising future. What an evolution!

Why share *Maria's* story? Like many of the readers of this article, I am the product of an upper middle class upbringing where opportunity abounded. Life was all about achievement and moving forward in a specific direction—graduating from high school, graduating from college, getting advanced degrees and striving to be a useful contributor in my chosen field. I never walked in shadows or had doubts about pursuing the “American” dream. For those of us who have come through the “conservatory model,” these more nontraditional music-making avenues are “foreign” to us. *Maria's* story serves as a wake-up call to the significant impact that can be generated on a whole segment of our student population through nontraditional music programs that can be the impetus to engage and serve large numbers of our bilingual and multilingual learners whose lives will be forever changed as their untapped talents are discovered, enhanced, reinforced, and celebrated.

I ran into *Maria* at a mariachi concert not so long ago and we revisited the events of that pivotal performance in Carson City back in 2003. She remembered it exactly as I had and we laughed about that bus ride from the airport to the luncheon and how so much had ensued since those early days of implementing the program. She is quick to credit all of

her successes to the fact that the CCSD's Mariachi Program “saved” her by giving her a purpose and a proud identity in her younger years when she was adrift in the hallways of her high school. She graduated with honors, is now married, and has a beautiful child and a considerable position with our local police department.

Epilogue

In her article about the significance of mariachi music, Sylvia Clark (2005) reflects on why mariachi education continues to take such a foothold in the United States:

A dominant factor in traditional ceremonies, mariachi music emerged as the primary musical representation of Mexican nationalism in Mexico, a representation sustained and elaborated when Mexicans migrated to the United States. Incorporating mariachi training in the school curriculum ensures the continuing transmission of music that is vital to the identity of the Hispanic population. Music teachers can encourage children to explore the musical traditions of their own cultural heritage as well as those of other countries. Participation in meaningful musical performances can help students take pride in themselves and add a powerful dimension to their education. (p. 227)

In researching how mariachi programs can serve our bilingual and multilingual learners who have found themselves in a new and unfamiliar surrounding, the question that many music educators ask is whether mariachi classes are only for those who have immigrated from Latin countries. The majority of mariachi ensembles from across the United States are made up of students of all ethnic groups and this is the icing on the cake. Working collaboratively, all students benefit from each other's backgrounds and experiences. They discover that they all have similarities when it comes to the joy that they experience from music-making and yet when it really comes down to it, they are really not all that different from each other—they just come from a variety of backgrounds. It is pure joy to watch how through their common love of music-making, these students have found a way to communicate and to literally “make beautiful music together.”

Among other districts, the CCSD, SFUSD, MNPS, Barrow County Schools, and Dennison Public Schools have embraced this culturally rich program through appropriate policy shifts to accommodate the unique needs of this genre. In doing so, administrators, educators, parents, the community, and even the students themselves have discovered that the mariachi classroom also serves as a life-skills classroom for all of its participants, but for ELs it can also serve as a bridge to the future.

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Home » April 2007 Mariachi Newsletter

April 2007 Mariachi Newsletter

Mariachi Education as a District Initiative: Development of the Clark County School District Program

Javier Trujillo has been a member of the world-renowned Mariachi Cobre, playing the guitarra de golpe and other instruments. He now oversees the mariachi programs in Clark County, Las Vegas. Clark County has one of America's largest music education programs, and its mariachi program is a model for others around the country.

Marcia Neel is a veteran of 36 years in public-school music education, and has directed successful secondary choral programs in Connecticut, Ohio, Massachusetts, and Nevada. She is currently supervisor of the secondary music education program of the Clark County School District.

As the Clark County School District (CCSD) of Las Vegas, Nevada, approached the millennium, its student population continued to rise at a staggering rate from 121,918 in 1990 to 231,125 in 2000—nearly 110,000 students in ten years (these and all figures are from the CCSD Student Data Services). The music program had continued to grow side by side with the increase in student population, so to broaden the course offerings, the CCSD implemented a guitar curriculum in the late 1990s. By the year 2000, the district had become the 6th largest in the country. The increase in the Latino population exceeded all others proportionately, and because the CCSD Music Program is always looking to serve its students, the mariachi program was the natural next step in the evolution of a comprehensive curriculum. The CCSD subsequently established the Secondary Mariachi Education program in the summer of 2002 with the aim of providing:

- Increased student enrollment in music education courses
- Opportunities to represent the CCSD and the Las Vegas community as music ambassadors through high-level performances
- Increased academic achievement by requiring a passing GPA to participate
- Increased student attendance
- Increased parent participation
- Increased self-esteem and self-confidence
- Positive social citizenry through performances
- A strengthened and globally diversified fine-arts-department focus
- Opportunities for students to serve as positive peer role models.

The program began with five full-time mariachi educators in the 2002–2003 school year. Within five years, that number grew to 15, and the program had an expanded list of goals, objectives, and activities.

Since the philosophy was to provide the CCSD student population with additional opportunities for music-making, the development of a comprehensive mariachi program was an obvious way to serve our community. At that time, the biggest challenge seemed to be how to get started. How could we sell the program, recruit and license the appropriate educators, write standards-based curriculum, organize new kinds of performance experiences, and provide appropriate professional development for this new program?

Below, Javier Trujillo, the Project Facilitator for the CCSD Secondary Mariachi Program, and Marcia Neel, Supervisor of the CCSD Secondary Music Education Program, have explained how the Clark County School District attended to each of these challenges.

I. Selling the Program

One would think that selling a mariachi program in a community that reflected an increasingly larger Latino population would be easy; however, it did present a number of challenges. The superintendent, board members, upper-level administrators, and principals were anxious to develop mariachi programs, as were members of the Latino community. The orchestra and band directors, however, were more cautious for all of the obvious reasons: the nontraditional style of music that would be taught, the concern that students would not be approaching music academically through music literacy, and the primary fear that the mariachi program would detract from the programs already in place. It was thus determined that of the 45 middle schools and 34 high schools in the district, the mariachi program would be piloted in only six secondary schools. This decision alleviated much of the concern on the part of the instrumental educators, allowing the program to develop in a methodical manner based on the recommendation of the professional mariachi musicians who would oversee its implementation.

II. Recruiting Mariachi Educators

Once the Clark County School District decided to implement a mariachi program, the next task was to find the educators who could ensure its success. One of the members of the CCSD Board of School Trustees knew of a

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program at Pueblo High School in Tucson, Arizona, which was one of the better-known, curriculum-based programs. Rather than visiting Pueblo High School, the CCSD invited the Pueblo High School Mariachi Aztlán ensemble to Las Vegas for a week of performing assemblies in the recommended pilot schools to see how the genre would be received. In addition, the school's assistant principal, Richard Carranza—a former mariachi educator himself—came to Las Vegas to present a workshop for CCSD music educators who already had an interest in this genre. The feedback from the assemblies and workshops was extremely positive, leaving the district administration confident that a mariachi program would indeed be successful and supported by students.

As is the case with all fields in music education, finding the best teachers is the surest way to guarantee the success of a program. With that in mind, the CCSD hired Javier Trujillo, who had been serving as the director of Mariachi Aztlán at Pueblo High School in Tucson. Four other mariachi musicians were hired to serve as teachers in the first year. Javier's schedule allowed him to split his time between teaching and serving as a program facilitator. In this way, he could visit with the four other mariachi educators on a regular basis to ensure consistency in delivering the curriculum.

III. Licensing Mariachi Educators

Early in the process of developing the program's philosophy, the district realized that, because mariachi education is not a teacher preparation major offered at the university level, the best mariachi educators would have to come from the performance industry. Since all music educators in Nevada are required to possess a music education license, this presented a real challenge.

In a meeting with the assistant superintendent, the CCSD decided to request that the State Department of Education endorse mariachi within the Business and Industry (B&I) category of Teacher Licensing. The B&I category is used when licensing professionals from the business world to work within the school district. Thus, the prospective mariachi educators were leaving their professional mariachi performance careers to introduce the program into the schools. To qualify for this license, these teachers would need at least three years' successful performance experience in a professional mariachi ensemble.

IV. Establishing a Sequential Curriculum Based on the Content Standards

The Clark County School District (CCSD) implemented the Secondary Mariachi Education Program with the objective of providing students of various ethnicities with an exceptional educational experience that would expand their cultural awareness and promote a lifelong appreciation for music. The program would offer students, many of them from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, a high-quality musical experience of a multigenerational tradition rooted in a sound, sequential, standards-based curriculum. Additionally, students would develop sensitivity, understanding, and respect for peoples from a broad spectrum of ethnic-cultural backgrounds. The following are the goals, objectives, activities, and materials and equipment standards of the CCSD Secondary Mariachi Education Program.

Goals

- Students will gain an understanding of the historical development of mariachi music.
- Students will explore and experiment with different musical styles and techniques to further their understanding of improvisation and musical interpretation.
- Students will gain confidence in their abilities as individual musicians and as members of a group.
- Students will participate in high-quality musical experiences from an established musical tradition.
- Students will gain an understanding of musical form.
- Students will gain and develop a lifelong appreciation of and interest in music.
- Students will develop critical thinking and problem solving skills, and a sense of personal responsibility as they increase their performance skills.

Objectives

- To develop an appreciation for musical form and its development
- To understand regional and historical variations of mariachi music
- To develop the ability to successfully demonstrate a variety of mariachi skills and techniques using appropriate instruments
- To incorporate traditional rhythms used in mariachi music into musical performances
- To increase awareness of the literal and emotional content of music

Activities

The implementation of a comprehensive mariachi education curriculum includes the following steps:

- The development of appropriate course syllabi
- The enhancement of equipment standards (instruments) at each school site
- Professional development for the mariachi faculty

In order to meet these goals and objectives, the CCSD formed the Mariachi Curriculum-Writing Task Force, comprised of a number of mariachi educators. The primary objective of this task force is to design a sequential, standards-based curriculum outlining recommended activities for instructional purposes.

Examples of mariachi curriculum documents currently available are:

- [Beginning Mariachi Guitar/Vihuela](#)
- [Beginning Mariachi Violin](#)
- [Mariachi Ensemble I](#)

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- Mariachi Ensemble II
- Mariachi Ensemble III
- Beginning Ballet Folklorico
- Latin American Musical Theater

Materials and Equipment Standards

According to the “[Opportunity-To-Learn Standards for Music Instruction](#),” published by MENC, the equipment standards in music

“... are intended to specify the physical and educational conditions necessary in the schools to enable every student, with sufficient effort, to meet the content standards in music. [While these equipment standards] focus on the learning environment necessary to teach music, it is important to note that the ultimate objective of all standards, all school curricula, and all school personnel is to help students to gain the broad skills and knowledge that will enable them to function effectively as adults and to contribute to society in today’s world and tomorrow’s.”

The following instruments should be provided in sufficient quantity:

- Violin
- Guitar
- Trumpet
- Guitarrón
- Vihuela

Additional instruments are provided for each additional large ensemble and in situations where students have financial hardship.

At least 15 new titles for each type of ensemble are added each year. Sufficient repertoire should be available to provide a three-year cycle of instructional materials. The library of music for performing groups is sufficient to provide a folder of music for each student per stand. The library contains no materials produced in violation of copyright laws. Every room in which mariachi is taught is equipped with a high-quality sound reproduction system capable of using current recording technology. Each school should contain a library that provides audio and video mariachi materials.

V. Organizing a Mariachi Festival

The CCSD Secondary Mariachi Education Program provides an annual three-day Mariachi Conference and Festival where students from across the district participate in two days of master classes (music-making workshops) taught by renowned, professional clinicians/performers of the mariachi art form. In this setting, students learn and perform a variety of music that demonstrates the highest level of musicianship possible for their specific school size and level of experience. Clinicians who are renowned for their professional musical accomplishments provide students with two days of intensive music workshops and one day of dress rehearsals where they further develop their skills as musicians and performers. The Mariachi Conference and Festival culminates in a professional concert production in which all student participants display their musical talents and newly-acquired musical skills to an audience of proud parents, school district personnel, and at-large community members.

VI. Professional Development for Mariachi Educators

While it can be assumed that students in instrumental music classes are already instructed according to Nevada’s Music Content Standard Two (performing on instruments), and that choral students are taught according to Nevada’s Music Content Standard One (singing), it can be difficult to “teach to the standards” on a daily basis. The CCSD is dedicated to continually improving the quality of our schools, and the Professional Development Division operates to train our staff through professional development workshops and classes.

The Professional Development Program assists mariachi educators in implementing specific teaching techniques and strategies to make Nevada’s Music Content Standards a regular part of their teaching. The following content standards are addressed through the Professional Development Program:

- Singing and playing of a variety of mariachi repertoire (NCS 1 and 2)
- Reading and notating music (NCS 5)
- Listening to, analyzing, and describing music (NCS 6)
- Evaluating music and music performances (NCS 7)
- Understanding music in relation to history and culture (NCS 9)

VII. Development of Other Relevant Performance Experiences

Providing students with performance opportunities plays a key role in their development as musicians. More important, it reinforces the concepts and skills learned in the classroom and increases self-confidence and self-esteem in each individual performer.

The Secondary Mariachi Education Program offers the following:

- Summer Mariachi Institute for Students
- Districtwide Holiday Concert
- Mariachi Festival (adjudicated) in the Spring.

Eventually, students form their own mariachi ensembles and perform in the community at all sorts of parties including *quinceañera*, which is the custom celebration of the young girl (*la Quinceañera*), and a recognition of her journey from childhood to maturity.

Within the next decade, mariachi programs are expected to explode across the country. It is hoped that the positive experiences and results that we have had in the Clark County School District will help music educators and districts alike as they move to implement a comprehensive mariachi curriculum into their schools.

MENC Resources

The next step after establishing a music program is to ensure lasting success through effective evaluation. MENC offers several publications that detail ways to assess academic achievement in your music program.

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Performance Standards for Music

Sample assessment strategies and benchmarks for assessing every grade level of student learning under the National Standards for Music Education

Opportunity-to-Learn Standards for Music Instruction

Recommends conditions schools should provide to help students achieve the National Standards for Music Education

Guidelines for Performances of School Music Groups

Advice on developing music program guidelines for balancing education and social needs

Evaluating Teachers of Music Performance Groups

Criteria for helping educators assess their own teaching and tools to help administrators conduct meaningful reviews

Handbook for Music Supervision

Best practices for leaders involved in curriculum and assessment, management, communication, budgets, scheduling, legal issues, and problem solving



¡Mariachi!

By Ruben Newell

If you pull out a yearbook from the 1960s and look up the band section, what will you see? A marching band, a concert band, small groups, and maybe a stage band? Take out a yearbook from the 1980s and you will probably see the same thing, except the stage band has likely changed its name to “jazz band.” What about your 2011-2012 yearbook? Still a marching band, a concert band, and jazz band? That’s how the yearbooks look at Denison High School. The problem is that while the students have changed dramatically in Denison over the last 50 years, the instrumental music program has been made of the same three major components: concert band, marching band, jazz band. When the 2012-2013 yearbook comes out, something will have changed. There will be marching band, concert band, jazz band, and mariachi.

What do you know about mariachi? Maybe I should ask that in a different way: what do you think you know about mariachi? If you are like I was two years ago, you think you know what mariachi is. If you are also like I was two years ago, you

are probably wrong. Over the last two years, I have learned that I didn’t know anything about mariachi. I learned that mariachi is a very passionate genre of music. I learned that the musicians that make up these mariachis are outstanding musicians with a wealth of knowledge about theory and technique. I learned that the top musicians in mariachi are almost all classically trained, and some hold degrees in composition or performance from major schools of music. I also learned that there was a population of our student body with a cultural connection to mariachi that I was not fully serving.

Denison, Iowa has changed considerably over the last 20 years. If you look up the 2010 census, you will find that Denison has a population of 8,300, and was one of the few rural Iowa cities to grow in population from 2000. That growth is centered around the 40 percent of our community that is of Hispanic decent. They are the families having more kids, which is why our school district of 2,200 students is 57 percent Hispanic. Our high school is around 775 students, and about half are Hispanic.

I know that Denison’s story is similar to the story of many towns in Iowa. The increasing diversity in



our student body is what makes our school special, but also provides challenges when planning curriculum and deciding what extra-curricular activities should be offered. When I first saw the ethnic breakdown of our district, the first thing I thought was, “Are we engaging as much of our student body as possible in music?” Thanks to a very strong middle school band program, directed by Patti Bekkerus, the instrumental music program in Denison serves a large portion of our student body. In fact, while the percentage of Hispanic students has risen in Denison, the instrumental music program involvement has not declined. It was not a question of if we could involve more students in music – rather could we involve more students deeper in music.

Discovery

In the fall of 2010, it came to my attention that there were a growing number of mariachi programs in the southern and western United States. The more I looked into them, the more I wanted one here in Denison. For six months, I looked up school districts on-line and contacted directors from around the country, but came to find that there were no school mariachi programs in Iowa. I knew I wanted to start a mariachi at DHS, but without a contact or colleague nearby to consult with, the outlook looked grim. Then, I received my 2011 Iowa Bandmasters Association Conference magazine. There, staring me in the face, was a session on starting a mariachi program.

That day in May at IBA changed the course of the instrumental music program in Denison. West Music, out of Coralville, had brought in Marcia Neel from Las Vegas to talk to us about what mariachi is and where we could go to get some training. That training was in June in Las Vegas, and West Music, along with Yamaha and Wenger, were offering some financial assistance to an Iowa director who wanted to start a program at their school. I left the clinic, found Patti and said, “We’re going to Vegas this summer.” We lined up a meeting with our superintendent as soon as we possibly could the next week and I braced myself to tell our

boss that we wanted to go to Las Vegas and learn how to start an entirely new program at Denison.

Our superintendent, Michael Pardun, was enthusiastic about the idea. He committed to sending us to Vegas for a week and buying the instruments we needed to get our mariachi program started in the fall of 2011. We had a meeting with our building principals, and it was all given a green light. Just like that, in the span of a couple months, we went from a dead end to a new program.

Patti and I spent a week in Las Vegas in late June, 2011, meeting some outstanding music educators and learning how to play new instruments (as well as a much-needed refresher from our college string methods class). We learned about the history of mariachi and worked with other band and orchestra directors who were also trying to start mariachi programs in their schools. During that week, our vision for a mariachi program was clarified and we started forming our plan for getting our program off the ground. When we returned to Denison, we had another meeting with our superintendent, and

“Some of the most rewarding educational experiences I have had have come over the last two years as a part of our mariachi program.”

the following week, all of our new instruments were ordered.

Implementation

In September, we decided to start our first mariachi group with members of the eighth-grade band. We took a period to give the eighth-grade band a presentation about mariachi, followed by a short survey from each student concerning their interest in being in this type of ensemble. We had to limit the number of students based on the number of instruments we had. By the middle of September, violin and guitar lessons had started. For a few months, the violins and guitars learned in sepa-



Jocelyn Moran and Jessica Cantu sing “De Colores” at the March, 2012 debut of Mariachi Picoso.

rate classes, twice a week for 30 minutes. Out of the guitar class, we chose two students who were excelling to make the switch to vihuela (a smaller, five string guitar) and guitarron (the bass instrument of the mariachi). Eventually, the flutes and trumpets were added to the guitar class.

Since we were using the eighth-grade band members for our first mariachi, we did not need to start trumpets or flutes. For the guitars and violins, we used the *Simplemente Mariachi* beginner method. When the violins

reached lesson 16, they had the tools to play though the first full arrangement, “De Colores.” At that point the entire mariachi was put together to start rehearsing for our first performance. The group rehearsed twice a week for 30 minutes.

By winter break, Denison Middle School had its first mariachi, and they had a name: Mariachi Picoso. The students picked it out themselves, because “picoso” means spicy, and they thought they were pretty spicy. Their debut performance was in late March, and Mariachi Picoso performed three songs. One of them featured a member’s father as a vocalist. The performance went well,



and it was well received by the community.

That first performance brought us some attention, including from a journalist in Des Moines, who came out to DMS to interview us and a few students. The result was an article in numerous papers across Iowa about what appeared to be Iowa's first school mariachi program. Thanks to that coverage, we spent the rest of the 2011-2012 school year learning three more songs out of the Libro Acompañante book series in preparation for two performances in Des Moines that June at educator conferences. Later in June, Patti and I returned to Las Vegas to get level two training and brought back plans for expansion of our mariachi program into the high school.

Today

Today, as I write this, Denison Community Schools has two mariachis – one at the middle school and one at the high school. It involves about 50 students: a number that is limited by the number of instruments the school owns. The school has purchased three vihuelas, two guitarrones, fifteen guitars, and fifteen violins. We also have trumpet and flute players in both groups, as well as a few violin and guitar players who own their own instruments. Our middle school group is made up of a new batch of eighth-grade band members, and have just started violin and guitar classes. Our high school group, which is primarily made up of our first group of eighth-graders from last year, has chosen a name: Mariachi Reyes del Oeste (“kings of the west”). Since our school mascot is the monarchs and we are in western Iowa, the name seemed to fit! Mariachi Reyes del Oeste just finished presenting at the IMEA (Iowa Music Educator Association) conference this past November, thanks to Robin Walenta at West Music and Marcia Neel from Music Ed Consultants in Las Vegas. They had the chance to perform with Maestro Jose Hernandez, who is one of the most well-known mariachi leaders/musicians/composers/arrangers in the world. Maestro Hernandez also worked with the mariachi students – an emotional, musical experience that those students will never forget.

As you look at your band program in your school, ask yourself if you are reaching the students with the same three major components that have been around for generations. If you are, then great, but maybe there's something else out there that could enhance the music education of your students. Maybe a mariachi program doesn't fit your school's population. Is there something else that would fit better? For Denison, it was mariachi, and I know there are directors out there reading this that think a mariachi program would fit into their school, too. If so, give Patti or I a call and we will tell you all about how we got the courage to follow through with this program, and you can, too. In spring of 2011, when Marcia Neel told me to stop worrying about it and just do it, she said that it would be a great addition to the band program and that it would be well-received by everyone. She was right.

If you can't tell, I am excited about our mariachi program. Some of the most rewarding educational experiences I have had have come over the last two years as a part of our mariachi program. Is it scary starting something new? Yes – but it is so rewarding. Have I questioned if we were doing the right thing? At the beginning I did, but I clearly remember the day when those doubts were put to rest. Right after we got the first group together for the first time after sectional rehearsals, I had them get out a piece called "Duermense." About two measures into the song, one of the violin players stopped, perked up and said, "My mom used to sing this to me at bed time." At that moment, I knew we had something special – we had found a way to connect our instrumental music program more intimately with a large part of our student body. We had made a personal connection with them through music. In the end, that's what really matters.



Ruben Newell, Eric Ramirez, and Patti Bekkerus.

Patti Bekkerus and Ruben Newell are the band directors for Denison Community Schools. Mr. Newell is in his 13th year teaching instrumental music, including 4 years in Denison. His current teaching duties include the Denison High School Concert Band, two jazz bands, pep band, the Monarch Marching Band, mariachi, and all 9-12 lessons. He is currently the webmaster of the Southwest Iowa Bandmasters Association.

Mrs. Bekkerus has been teaching instrumental music for 26 years, including 19 years in Denison. Her current teaching duties include 6th grade band, 7th grade band, 8th grade band, DMS Jazz Band, Middle School Marching Band, mariachi and 6-8 lessons. She is currently the middle school honor band

chair for southwest Iowa, as well as Past-President of the Southwest Iowa Bandmasters Association.

Visit Denison's mariachi program online at www.MonarchBand.org, and on Facebook: www.facebook.com/mariachiReyesDelOeste/.

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