

Arts Education Policy Review Article
Mariachi and Spanish-Speaking English Learners:
District Initiatives, Models and Education Policy
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The Priority of Attaining English Language Proficiency

In December of 2015, President Obama signed into law the bipartisan Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) thereby reauthorizing the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) originally signed into law by President Johnson in April, 1965, as part of his “War on Poverty.” Because the new law will have a significant impact English learner programs, the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) has published an online resource document to assist state superintendents of public instruction in digesting the intent of the provisions as they pertain to English language proficiency.¹ This document provides a comprehensive overview of the specific provisions most relevant to the education of English learners (ELs) as well as the potential challenges for states.

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. 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 well-rounded education provision. It is for this reason, as well as to set a backdrop for this article, that 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 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 English learners (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: (1) to help English learners attain proficiency and academic success in English, (2) 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, **(3) to help the education community provide effective instructional programs designed to assist English learners**, (4) to help English learners enter all-English instructional settings, and (5) to promote language instruction to the families of English learners as well as to the community.²

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.³

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 which provide culturally-relevant experiences for Latino students, are also serving as an effective intervention for those ELs who are just beginning to embark upon 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 English Language Proficiency (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, 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 which 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 Bourgeoning 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 percent 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.⁴

With an increasing number of Latino students, and with as many as 32% of those under 18 living in poverty,⁵ 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,”⁶ 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 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.

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.” 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.”⁷ Carranza, who did not speak English when he started school in Tucson, Arizona, discovered this first-hand when serving as the mariachi teacher at Pueblo Magnet High School. His nationally recognized mariachi program produced a 90 percent 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 a 2010 *Census Brief*, Sharon R. Ennis, Merarys Rio-Vargas and Nora G. Albert articulated a number of findings which 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 which accounted for approximately three-quarters of the 15.2 million increase during this same period. The vast majority (63 percent) of Latinos in the U.S. 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.⁸

With 69 percent of current Latino students identified as being of Mexican origin and with growth indicators estimating an increase of 166 percent in this sub-group by 2050⁹, 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's (CCSD) 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 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 (4) high schools and four (4) 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 models¹⁰

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 (6) 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 which 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

A. 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.”¹¹ Kerry Bryant, former mariachi workshop attendee and Fine Arts Coordinator from Barrow County, GA, who implemented such a program upon his return to his district, wrote in a subsequent article that the mariachi program is infused with this strategy in that,

it uses the students-teaching-students model. When we started...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.¹²

B. 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.”¹³

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 non-verbal 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.

C. San Francisco Unified School District, CA

Mariachi and the Core Music Standards. The mariachi program of the San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD), which sent ten (10) educators to the 2015 and 2016 National Mariachi Workshops for Educators®, has developed a standards-based approach built upon all four of the artistic processes of Creating (Cr), Performing (Pr), Responding (Re) and Connecting (Cn). Though 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 (3) 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” was compiled to establish a benchmark—a picture of students who have been enrolled in middle and high school music and the impact of music study on student engagement and academic achievement.¹⁴

A set of established questions was examined that would guide researchers Becky J.A. Eason, Ph. D. and Christopher M. Johnson, Ph.D., 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 does 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.

Figure 3 shows that of the 6,006 members of the MNPS class of 2012, 35 percent took at least one music class while in high school. That course would have fulfilled the one-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 5 indicates that fewer Latino students participated in music courses than did other samplings.

Figure 5. Music Participation Rates by Ethnicity (n=5,984)

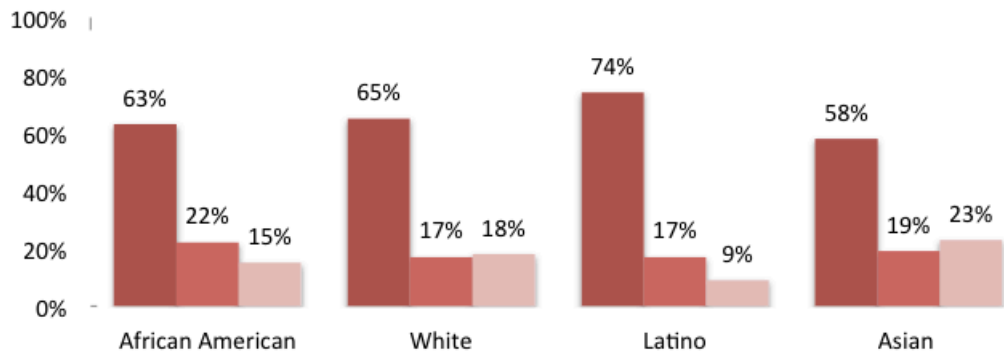


Figure 7 shows that the attendance of Latino students who took at least one year or less of music coursework was commensurate with other ethnicities in that they attended school 91 percent of the time while those taking more than one year attended school at a rate of 93%. In a school year made up of 180 days, that adds up to a difference of 11 school days—more than two weeks of class.

Figure 7. School Attendance Rates by Ethnicity (n=5,742)

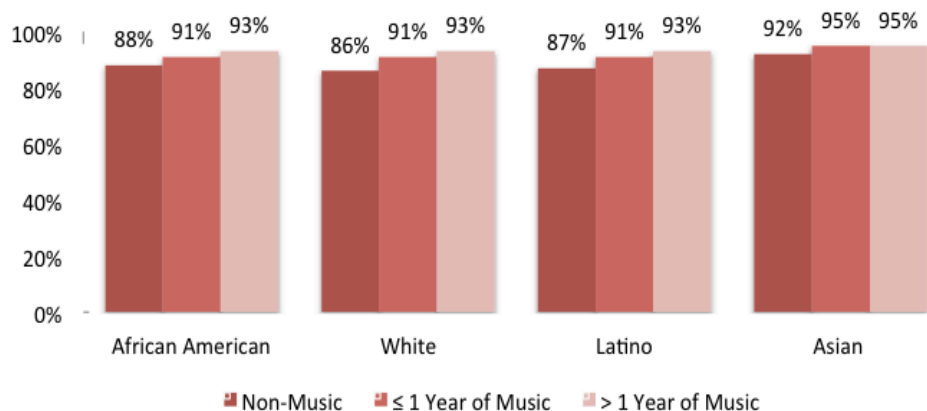


Figure 9 indicates that across all student groups, those with increased participation levels in music had fewer referrals.

Figure 9. Discipline Referrals by Ethnicity (n=4,490)

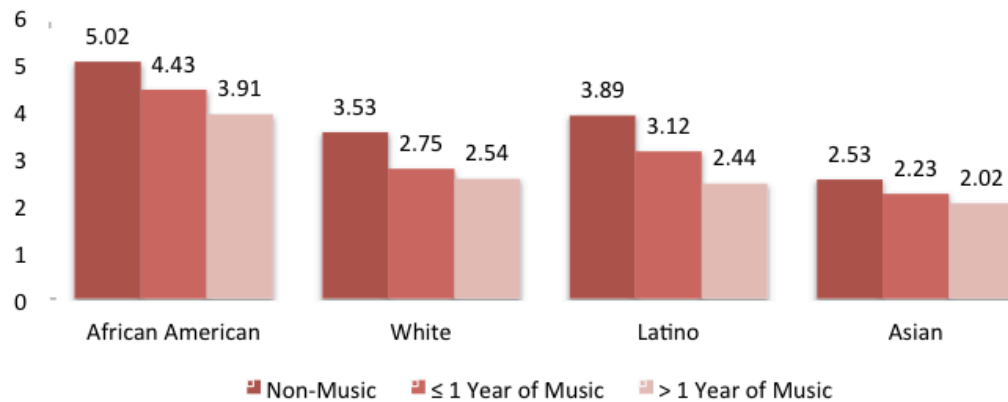


Figure 11 below illustrates that across all student groups, those with the highest music participation levels also earned the highest GPAs.

Figure 11. Grade Point Average by Ethnicity (n=4,119)

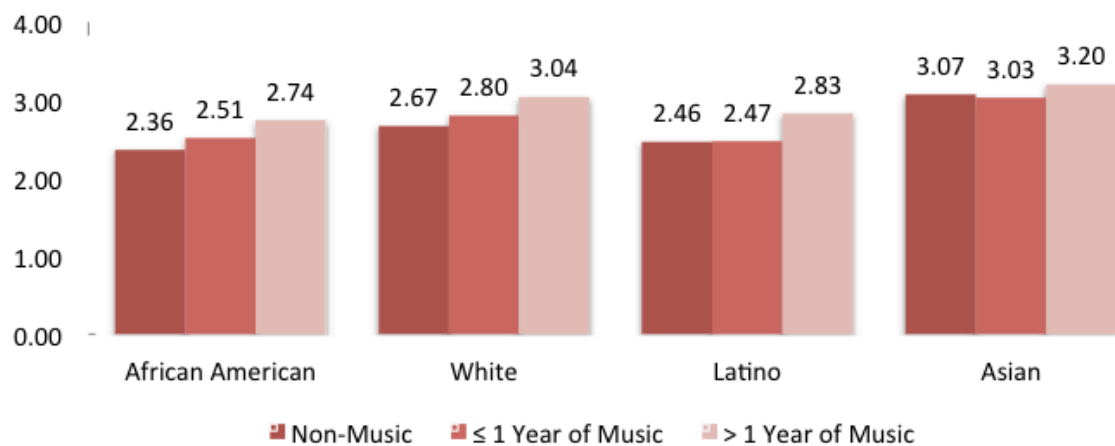
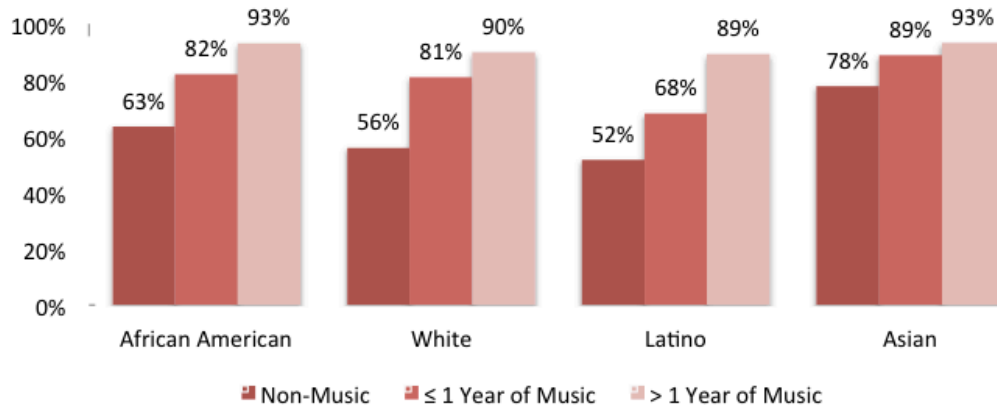


Figure 13 below indicates that the music-related graduation gap was the greatest for Latino students. This difference means that Latino high school students who exceed the district's fine arts requirement by taking more than 1 year of music are 71 percent more likely to graduate on time than their Latino peers with no music experience.

Figure 13. On-time Graduation Rates by Ethnicity (n=4,994)



Figures 15 and 16 illustrate that African American, White, and Latino students with higher level of music participation levels all scored higher on the ACTs.

Figure 15. ACT-English Scores by Ethnicity (36 point scale) (n=3,462)

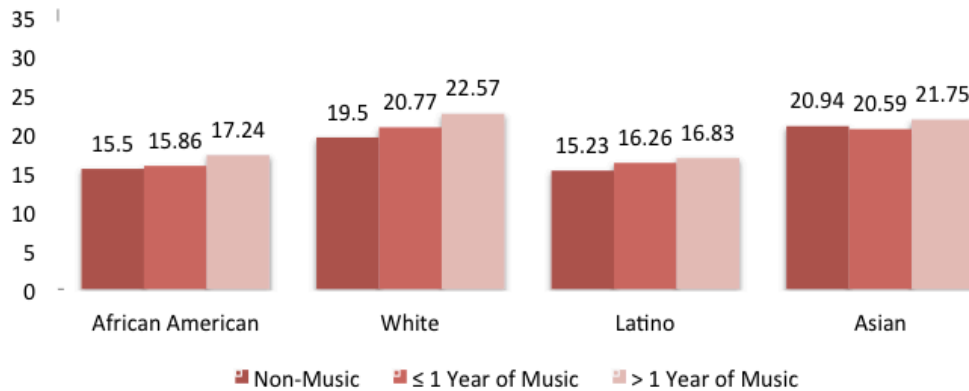
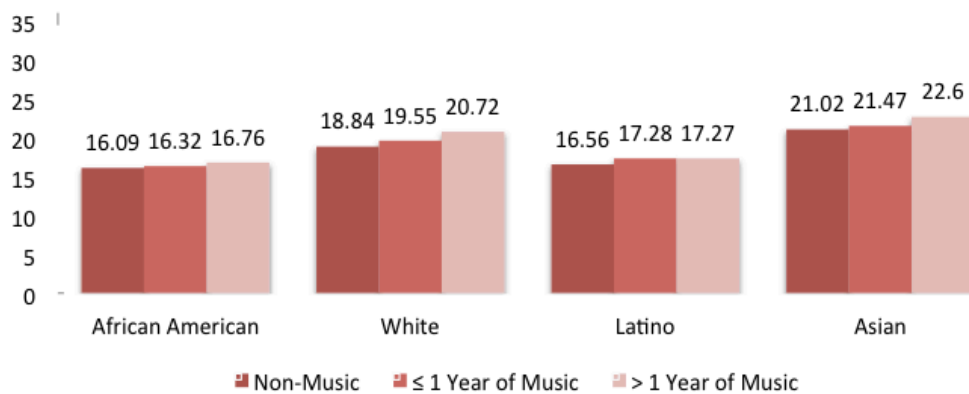


Figure 16. ACT-Mathematics Scores by Ethnicity (36 point scale) (n=3,461)



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. 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 which 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 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 post-secondary 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 two years ago, you think you know what mariachi is. If you are also like I was two 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 MECA (Music Education Center of America) Continuing Education Program, VanderCook College of Music partners with Music Education Consultants, Inc., to offer the *National Mariachi Workshop for Educators®* in Las Vegas, for teachers seeking practical knowledge and skills that can be used in developing a mariachi program. This one-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 which 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 (3) levels—Beginning, Intermediate, and Advanced Pedagogy—to best accommodate the individual needs of the programs of those who are in attendance. Over the ten (10) years of providing this professional development resource, participants 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 Mariachi on Other Programs

Initially, there were concerns about how this program would impact the traditional music programs—i.e. 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's¹⁵ 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 twelve (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, one-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 Maria's comments about 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 this particular genre of music was so rewarding for her to learn and perform personally.

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 just speak from the heart – to just share with them what she had been relaying to me. With about twenty minutes left on our bus trip, Maria suddenly fell silent. Her hands came up on the seat 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 were 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 that 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 of 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 acknowledgements 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 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 musical accomplishments but also to recognize 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, Midwestern 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 non-traditional 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 non-traditional music programs which 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, 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 reflects on why mariachi education continues to take such a foothold in the U.S.

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.

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 vast majority of mariachi ensembles from across the U.S. 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."

Notes

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15. All names are pseudonyms.

