

Partnering with Parents

By Carolyn Sybesma, *The People's Music School, Director of Artistic Planning & Partnerships*

The People's Music School (TPMS) is the first 100% free music school of its kind in the country. Founded in 1976 by Rita Simo, an immigrant from the Dominican Republic, our school has grown into a strong community movement. We serve 1,000 students ages 5-18 through programs in the four corners of Chicago: Uptown, Albany Park, Back of the Yards and Bronzeville. Our students average nine hours of instruction per week and usually participate for seven years. Our students are 100% underserved, 90% students of color and have a 100% college entrance rate.

Rita Simo built TPMS on a simple philosophy: "To whom much is given, much is expected." She laid the groundwork for this service component from day one: in the school's very first location 43 years ago, the sign Rita posted in the window read, "Free music lessons in exchange for volunteer work." The idea was that in exchange for kids receiving a free, life-changing music education, parents should give back.

Fast-forward 43 years, and the TPMS family partnership model has captivated our city: every family at TPMS is required to give 16 service hours per child, per year. This adds up to over 10,000 hours of service or 10+ full time jobs. Families volunteer in every way imaginable: They clean our building, lead security efforts, provide electrical work and fix our roof. Families fundraise, cater our events, (including the best pupusas you will ever eat), usher performances, provide administrative assistance at the front desk and photocopy. They are teaching assistants for our ensembles, group classes and theory lessons. "I don't even see it as volunteer work," one of our mothers told me when describing her investment in the school. A father explained, "I feel a sense of pride. This school is founded on the greatest premise—to educate children—and so I feel good to do my part; not just for my children but the community."

Impacts of our family partnership model:

- Maintains a lean cost structure, ensuring maximum resources are going to our students
- The 100% commitment of our families inspires increased support from external stakeholders

- Increased student retention to over 90% year-to-year, and accelerated student progression
- Students observe and absorb this service mindset, creating a generation of future leaders in communities.



Families at The People's Music School make pupusas for their end of year Performapaloozathon. Credit: TK Photography.

So how does our family partnership model actually work? First, we create a culture of service with our community from day one. Expectations are communicated at every family open house and orientation, in our family handbook and at every family meeting throughout the year.

Next, we communicate service opportunities and offer families a variety of outlets in which to sign up, to promote accessibility for our families who range in access to technology. In cases where a student's family is not present or able to complete the service hours, opportunities for the student to fulfill the requirement are provided. Finally, we utilize data tracking and reporting systems to ensure all families are meeting the agreed expectations.

We know that family partnership is critical to our success, yet it's not always easy. We have learned that accountability is key. Families must be accountable for completing their hours. Staff must be accountable for tracking and reporting data accurately and communicating effectively. Our organization must be accountable for creating a culture of service and devoting enough staff to ensure success (we have a community manager dedicated to our family engagement strategy and program coordinators to manage family engagements at each site).

Most importantly, we remember that the focus is on the students—the bright, driven, resilient young people for whom all this exists. TPMS is a music school, but the real magic is in the community, the values and the unwavering commitment to service that has guided the school through four decades of growth and impacted generations of young people in Chicago.

EDITORIAL

By Sebastian Ruth, *Community MusicWorks, Founder & Artistic Director*

In 2019, many organizations in the United States are examining societal oppressions that affect our communities, and we look for ways to adopt new practices in our educational spaces around diversity, equity, and inclusion. To make progress, it's critical to examine our work in new ways if we are to have an impact in countering oppressive practices.

Paolo Freire, in his analysis of the dynamics of oppression, discusses the perils of a banking model of education, where teachers view their job as filling the empty vessel of a student with information. This approach reinforces to the learner that people in positions of power hold the answers and that they as learners need to respect the system that keeps them powerless. Instead, Freire proposes an educational dynamic where teacher and student are co-investigators and that their pursuit of learning happens side-by-side.

At Community MusicWorks we strive to teach in a manner consistent with Freire's ideals, so that student and teacher share ownership of the learning process. We've created shared learning plans amongst teachers and students, where students voice their educational and performing goals. The learning trajectory becomes one held mutually, rather than solely in the mind of the teacher.

I recently watched a colleague debrief a performance with an ensemble of middle school students. They referred to a list they had co-created of what makes a satisfying performance, and where their challenges and successes were found. Students had a voice alongside their teachers, making the process of improvement collective and transparent.

Breaking old habits can be difficult. But the rewards of working in this way come from a student's sense of ownership and a student's expectation that their voice matters. They can be authors of their experience, and can have agency in their lives beyond music.

Sebastian Ruth

"Musical training is a more potent instrument than any other, because rhythm and harmony find their way into the inward places of the soul." — Plato

News Notes

El Sistema USA recently announced the launch of the [El Sistema USA Working Groups](#). These groups provide both a virtual and in-person space for leaders to come together to discuss and share best practices and challenges they face. This platform for honest conversations seeks to create toolkits and measurable takeaways for the field. The topics for the 2019-20 El Sistema USA Working Groups include Equity Centered Pedagogy, Growing New and Emerging Organizations, Public School Partnerships and High School Programming. [Learn more here.](#)

Do you have ambitious top students who are interested in joining NYO2? NYO2 is Carnegie Hall's intensive summer training ensemble for outstanding young American players ages 14-17; it's a life-changing experience. [Applications are open](#), nominations are due by Dec. 1, and the application deadline is Dec. 12. Applications include audition videos, a short essay and letters of recommendation. They eagerly invite applications from students in El Sistema-inspired programs. [Watch](#) to view a performance of NYO Jazz's inaugural tour to Asia in summer 2019.

[Sistema New Brunswick \(SNB\)](#), Canada's largest El Sistema-inspired program, reaches 1,200 children daily—with 60 teaching artists across 10 orchestra centers. This includes First Nations communities, newcomers to Canada, urban and rural communities of both official languages, English and French. This year, for the first time, one SNB center brings these communities together in a single program. This is an example of social cohesion through music, respecting and celebrating all people as valued members of one society. As they say at SNB, "Just music, joy and friends."

An update on the largest Sistema-inspired program in the U.S.: [Baltimore's OrchKids](#) now has 2,100 students in nine program sites. One OrchKids site includes kindergarten students and a full-time band director; another is forming an in-school band program. Last summer, 41 OrchKids students traveled to music programs in Indiana, Michigan, Maryland, New York, Maine and Austria. One of these students, Nijaya Brown, has matriculated to the [Interlochen Arts Academy](#) on a full tuition scholarship.

Resources

[English Language Learner \(ELL\)](#) students are the fastest-growing student population in the United States—by 2025, an estimated 25% of public school students will be emergent multilingual learners, according to the [National Education Association \(NEA\)](#). Check out some free resources to support ELLs in your program. [ASCD](#) has gathered resources to help break down current barriers that prevent these students from reaching their full potential. The association's free e-newsletter, [ASCD Express](#), also provides practical, actionable strategies and information in the education field.

[Centering the Work](#) is a new online resource for teaching artists to help align understanding and practices with social justice priorities. Provided by the Teaching Artist Guild (TAG), it is a crowd-sourced repository that celebrates best practices, practitioners, and projects from all over the country to inspire and support expanding our field's practice. Browse the resources, and reach out to [TAG](#) to share additional resources they should include: kenny@teachingartistsguild.org

Most American teenagers—70%—across gender, racial and economic groups, see [depression and anxiety as major problems among their peers](#), significantly more than they see bullying or drug and alcohol abuse. Teens from low-income households are more concerned about drug addiction, drinking, teen pregnancy and gangs than are more affluent teens. Also, teens in lower-income households are more concerned about the time they spend with parents—four-in-ten say they spend too little time with their parents, compared with about one-in-five teens in households with higher incomes. [Read more.](#)

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Fostering Environmental Stewardship in Sistema Programs

By Keane Southard, Composer and Pianist

One of our core tenets in the El Sistema movement is that great music education can be more than training on an instrument—it can create better citizens who contribute positively in all aspects of our world. We teach our students to take care of their instruments, the facilities they use, and their classmates and communities. Shouldn't we also teach them to take care of the environment as well? After all, their generation is going to be dealing with the effects of climate change for their entire lives, so we have a duty to prepare them to confront the mounting challenges of environmental degradation.

As we all ponder what it might look like to foster environmental stewardship for Sistema programs, I have some ideas to share. The biggest way to reduce impact is through doing more with less and cutting out what is unnecessary, especially concerning material items. For example, one might ask, "Do we really need to buy bottled water when we already have clean drinking fountains at our facilities?" And, whatever actions we take, it is important to talk with our students and community about what we are doing and why. We all need to take action on this problem, and our Sistema programs are a great place to start.

Editor's Note: Sistema programs provide music education in an ensemble context. This can (and perhaps should) be intrinsically related to environmental activism—it is about creating civically responsible young people who understand the connectedness between one another and other living things. Perhaps our students can develop long-term projects, like creating workshops alongside teaching artists and families to integrate a recycling program at your nucleo. Clean-up drives can serve to benefit the local community's environment, while building relationships among those who participate. And, of course, we can invite other arts and community organizations to join us for a day of environmental service. But the biggest change we can make is in our thinking—the environment is the foundation of personal health, healthy communities and functioning societies.

ACTION FOR THE MONTH: Urge Your Congresspeople to Join the Arts Caucus

Elected officials pay attention to the priorities of their constituents. Make sure your Representative and Senators know that the arts/arts education are high priorities for you. If they already belong to the Arts Caucus, thank them and let them know this matters a lot to you. If not, urge them to join and tell them why. Find out about their membership [here](#); information on the caucuses and sample letter [here](#).