

# Play On, Philly!: Music as a Tool for Life and Learning

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## Introduction

Can music improve academics? Is music a social innovation? Can music education help combat the impacts of toxic stress and increase executive function skills?

Since his days as a young musician from Atlanta, GA, Stanford Thompson, Founder of Play, On Philly! (POP), began exploring the correlation between music and social change. While in his second year of study at The Curtis Institute of Music, Thompson was asked a life-changing question during an assembly at a Philadelphia elementary school: "Why should I care about Beethoven?" As Thompson sought answers to this question and more, he learned of a music education program in Venezuela called El Sistema, a social development and music education program. He joined the Abreu Fellowship Program at the New England Conservatory to spend the year studying the El Sistema philosophy, non-profit management, and make plans to launch a program in Philadelphia.

While attending an El Sistema conference in May 2010, Thompson met Philadelphia philanthropist and current

POP Board President Carole Haas Gravagno and learned of their shared passion for music and Philadelphia youth. After the conference Thompson reflected on his earlier experience during the assembly and contacted Gravagno. Thompson and Gravagno spent time discussing various ways to eradicate issues relating to the achievement gap, violence, and how to present music as a tool to engage youth. POP was founded as an innovative solution to help address these issues among Philadelphia's next generation.

## **The Problem: Toxic Stress and the Impairment of Executive Function Skills**

In Philadelphia and scores of other communities across the country, hundreds of thousands of children are developing a range of negative survival skills due to toxic stress in their environments and a lack of positive support from the adults in their lives. Over time, sustained high levels of toxic stress can eventually disrupt the brain's wiring and ultimately impair the development of critical executive function and self-regulation skills that enable them to effectively plan, focus attention, remember instructions, and manage multiple tasks successfully.

Among the approximately 234,000 students in Philadelphia, nearly 90,000 live at or below the poverty line, placing them at a higher risk for encountering the kinds of toxic stress that can be so detrimental to their

development. In the case of POP, Thompson and Gravagno were seeking to create a program that would help to redirect the negative survival skills children living in impoverished and toxic stress-filled environments frequently develop. Realizing that the traditional wisdom of longer school days and simply “keeping kids busy” has not necessarily been the best approach, the duo hoped to use a different way of looking at what children need in terms of support and how to secure those resources for them. To that end, POP’s philosophy is to not only keep its kids off the streets, but rather, to use sustained music instruction as a means of rebuilding the skill sets and values kids will need to have the strong executive functions necessary for lifelong success. It is a tall order, to be certain, but one they believe is everyone’s responsibility, from parents to schools to the broader regional community.

## **The Solution: Using instrumental instruction to engage youth and build executive functions.**

Music alone does not inherently make children smarter. However, where music can impact outcomes for children is by helping to rebuild executive function skills. It teaches children how to focus, build teamwork and improve memory. POP’s program engages students for two to three hours, five days a week, one of the only music education programs in the region, and country for

that matter, to offer such intensive and sustained instruction. For Thompson, it is this consistency which helps to drive POP's success and which is necessary to develop the executive function skills that are at the center of his theory of change.

POP also sets itself apart by employing all teaching artists as its instructors, and by having one teacher per instrument to allow for highly specialized instruction. Through POP, students also gain unique opportunities to learn from celebrated professionals such as Yannick Nézet-Séguin, Music Director of The Philadelphia Orchestra, and world-renowned musicians like Bobby McFerrain and Wynton Marsalis.

In developing their program, it was also critical to Thompson and Gravagno that POP eliminate many of the barriers to entry that other music-based programs can present to children. For starters, there is no prior experience required. Students coming into the program may have never held an instrument before, and that is just fine by Thompson. Furthermore, many musical programs bring high entry costs due to the expense of instrument rentals or purchases and other program fees. POP participants pay only a nominal registration fee ranging from \$25 to \$125, determined by a parent or guardian's ability to pay.

It its first year of programming at St. Frances de Sales in 2010, POP received 193 interest forms within the first four days of the enrollment period, a figure that ultimately

increased to 270 by end of enrollment, out of a school population of approximately 500 students. Due to the overwhelming demand, they held a lottery to select participants, and ended up with a first year class of 86, more than double what they had anticipated for the first year of programming. Since then, POP has expanded its programming to Freire Charter School as well, with total combined enrollment in both schools of 250 children at both schools.

## **Looking Ahead: Proving Success and Building Scale**

Looking to the future, the challenge as Thompson sees it is to prove that they can consistently help kids move successfully from kindergarten through graduation. An intermediate goal for doing so is to develop proven models in parochial, charter, and public schools, as well as city community centers. Once they can prove success for each model, they can approach archdiocese, district, and city officials to help build POP to a much larger scale. How large does Thompson envision? By 2035, he would love to see seven programs each in seven different Philadelphia neighborhoods, for a total of nearly 50 programs that serve up to 10,000 students.

Of course, a constant concern for POP, as with many non-profit organizations, is the need to continually prove their worth and connect with funders, parents, and other key stakeholders. While POP started out as just a program, it

has now grown into a full-fledged organization with all of the associated overhead and administrative costs. The question, according to Thompson, is whether funders will see the value in having that organizational structure - and the costs that go along with it - to move the programming forward.

Thompson believes one way to do so is through strong evaluation and a focus on evidence-based practices. To do so, POP works with Wolf Brown, a private firm that provides research-based knowledge to the cultural sector, to assess the executive skill sets of participating students by analyzing 3 core areas: working memory, inhibition control, and selective attention. In order to draw a connection to POP's work specifically, Wolf Brown compared these skills among kids involved in POP programs with kids at participating schools who were involved in other supplemental programming, such as academic tutoring, sports, or other extra-curricular activities. Their results have shown that that POP students scored a half letter grade ahead of the kids in other supplemental programming, that POP students were ten points on composite higher in every section of standardized tests, and attended school 30% more than their peers.

Another area critical to achieving his grand vision for the future is to continue to stay ahead of needs that may develop. Having had the vision to build POP before the need was explicit has proven a key to POP's success.

While developing POP, Thompson and Gravagno did not yet realize what would happen to the funding landscape for Philadelphia's schools, but it turns out there is now a gaping hole in funding for music and other arts programs, and POP is uniquely positioned to address those needs.

Stanford believes now more than ever students must engage in activities that stretch their imagination, build creativity, and build new skills. He notes that for more programming like POP to reach fruition, it is necessary for there to be more people and organizations like Gravagno that are willing to take a risk. Coming full circle, Thompson says he now has an answer to the kid who asked him about Beethoven all those years ago. He would tell him to come to West Philadelphia and see the impact POP is having on the students touched by Beethoven's music, the significant transformations being made through this crucial outlet.

## ***References***

### ***PA Department of Education***

***Figure based on Pew's 2013 State of the City report noting a poverty rate of 39% among children in Philadelphia, [http://www.pewtrusts.org/uploadedFiles/wwwpewtrustsorg/Reports/Philadelphia\\_Research\\_Initiative/Philadelphia-City-Statistics.pdf](http://www.pewtrusts.org/uploadedFiles/wwwpewtrustsorg/Reports/Philadelphia_Research_Initiative/Philadelphia-City-Statistics.pdf)***

***<http://playonphilly.org/mission-history.php>***