

Meeting Changing Needs in Music Education

Dave Allen 18 October 2016

How can an established, mission-driven institution innovate in its second century of operation? At Settlement Music School, a community music school with six locations in and around Greater Philadelphia, it has involved finding novel ways of doing what the school does best: offering instruction in music and dance to everyone, regardless of age, background, or financial means.

Through a combination of extending the scope of existing programs, partnering with similarly minded institutions, and using its foundation in teaching and instruction to train others, Settlement has positioned itself as a leader and, as several recent initiatives have demonstrated, a flexible and adaptable one in meeting community needs.

Making Art Out of Trauma

Through a partnership with New Jersey-based Community Treatment Solutions (CTS), Settlement is exploring new avenues of "allied therapy," employed jointly by Settlement's music faculty and therapists with the Kardon Center for Arts Therapy. This method of therapy combines numerous other forms of therapy outside traditional talk-based therapy in helping young

people who have experienced trauma to process the difficult things in their lives and turn them into meaningful art.

CTS clients come each week to Settlement's Camden Branch to receive additional care focusing on building strengths and teaching skills that promote emotional stability through integrated treatment approaches. "When we heard about Settlement and the work they do, we thought it would be a good fit," says Lynn Connor, Chief Program Officer for CTS. "Theater, songwriting and dance are great ways for our youth to express themselves. They also learn new skills and get to experience the arts in a non-traditional way."

Teachers in the allied therapy program encourage their students to be creative and to tap into something within themselves that they may never have done before, through teaching and modeling, and then allowing the youth to do it in his or her own way. Working the process out to create something with assistance from the teacher leads to a sense of accomplishment and pride that many of these youth may not have felt before. This further leads to a sense of competency which increases self-esteem and self-worth.

Reaching Populations in Need

As part of an effort for a wider, more inclusive approach to music education, Settlement recently partnered with the

Braille Enrichment for Literacy and Learning (BELL) Academy, a program of the National Federation of the Blind that provides intensive Braille instruction to blind and low-vision children. In recognition of this work, Settlement helped to facilitate a two-week summer camp, made possible by the Albert B. Millett Fund and administered by BNY Mellon Wealth Management.

Earlier this year, BELL Academy participants participated in an "Instrument Petting Zoo," trying out a wide array of instruments and making sounds on them with the guidance of a skilled adult musician. The result was heartwarming and powerful; every time the BELL Academy participants made a noise on the instrument for the first time, they immediately broke into a grin.

The students asked questions about every instrument and learned about the proper way to hold the instrument as well as the correct embouchure. They ended the session secure in the knowledge that playing an instrument and pursuing music were attainable goals. Settlement will continue to extend this work during 2016-17 by offering supplementary music instruction at Saint Lucy Day School for Children with Visual Impairments.

Training Others to Teach

In addition to providing direct instruction to new and underserved populations, Settlement has also drawn on the strength of its teaching and the dedication of its

faculty to train others in providing music instruction.

Over the past year, Settlement has partnered with Diversified Community Services, a social services provider in the Point Breeze neighborhood of Philadelphia, both to offer music classes to the families that Diversified serves and to train Diversified's social workers in offering positive, family-focused instruction.

Early childhood education has been part of Settlement's core program for over 20 years, with numerous early childhood classes helping to develop children's body coordination skills, increase emotional stability, and promote curiosity, creativity, and positive socialization through early exposure to music and creative movement.

Starting with Children's Music Playshop, an introductory music class for children ages 6 months to 3 years and their guardians, Settlement provides exposure to music in a fun, purposeful, and welcoming environment. Playshop, in fact, came about as the result of a new programming initiative in 2013, and the class has quickly grown from a pilot program to a popular offering available at each of Settlement's six branch locations. The children and families served by Diversified have benefited from the parent-child bonding that Playshop encourages, and with continued support they will see increases in social development throughout childhood.

Meeting Changing Needs

Even a 109-year-old institution can find new ways of doing things. For as many students as Settlement has served over its more than 100-year history, there are still those who have not experienced its programs or approach to teaching, some of whom might not believe that a music school's offerings would go beyond classical music-based lessons or ensembles. However, new offerings, in art forms ranging from jazz to rock to musical theater, have long been a driving force behind Settlement as an organization. In fact, one of the central focuses of the school's strategic plan over the past five years has been "innovation meets changing needs."

Additionally, with growth in off-site programs offered through partnerships with neighborhood schools and other community organizations, many students who are new to Settlement take part in the school's programs without entering one of the six community branches. The buildings, with their classrooms, libraries, and gathering spaces, are assets in themselves, but neither proximity to those physical spaces nor access to transportation should be a barrier to access.

In identifying populations not currently served and pinpointing their needs, the faculty and staff at Settlement devise new ways of reaching and connecting with members of those populations and groups. Frequently, this involves meeting potential students and their families in the neighborhoods where they live, as well as making creative adaptations to time-tested programs and

methods. Through this work, the mission of the school advances and the institution pushes forward into the 21st Century.

Author Bio

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