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String orchestra teacher Jorge Morales coaches a student violinist practicing scales during class at Chief Sealth International High School. Photo by Steve Korn

FEATURE

Key Change

How organizations like Seattle Youth Symphony Orchestras are moving the needle on music education in Seattle schools, and what that means for our city's future.

by GEMMA WILSON January 26, 2016

High school classrooms have a distinct din, an aural miasma of voices chattering, papers shuffling, school bells ringing. In a large, fluorescent-lit room in Chief Sealth International High School, that ubiquitous, low-grade racket is joined by the astringent whine of student violinists and the tentative rumble of someone noodling on a double bass.

At Sealth, in West Seattle's Delridge neighborhood, this musical sound is relatively new. Six years ago Denny Middle School, with which Sealth shares a campus, partnered with Seattle Youth Symphony Orchestras and six area elementary schools to provide professional coaching to students learning string instruments. When SYSO started there, Denny had 39 kids in the orchestra. Now they have three orchestras and an estimated total of some 160 participating kids. As Denny's orchestra grew, more graduating eighth graders wanted to continue their musical education, increasing demand for an orchestra class at Sealth. So Sealth added an orchestra class, the Denny orchestra teacher became the Denny/Sealth orchestra teacher, and string orchestra joined the school's official music classes. (A dedicated teacher had been leading and fundraising for the schools' bands for more than a decade.)

While Sealth's band and orchestra are growing, they still pale in comparison to the leading examples of music education in Seattle Public Schools: Garfield and Roosevelt High, whose jazz bands and orchestras have placed among the top in the country for decades. Those award-winning programs are outliers in the city's complicated, imbalanced arts education ecosystem. That imbalance has deep systemic and societal roots, and they're not unique to Seattle. But questions of equity and arts education on the rise nationally—in 2012, U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan declared our country's arts

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without.

The benefits of music education aren't up for debate. Hundreds of studies show that music education has a positive benefit on school performance and in life. Kids who get music education have higher grades, then higher salaries. They even vote more as adults. Mastering an instrument requires a particular discipline that is also an excellent teacher of perseverance.

"There are a lot of kids that don't believe in themselves, if they've often hit failure," says Kathleen Allen, who was the school district's Community Arts Liaison before becoming SYSO's Director of Education, Communications and Partnerships.

"Research has shown that this, even more than doing well in school, is a critical component of success: the opportunity to know that if you work hard things will change."

As Sealth's orchestra class warms up, orchestra teacher Jorge Morales helps 20-some kids tune their strings and hands out music before stepping up to his podium to conduct. Daniel Mullikin, a professional cellist and music coach with Seattle Youth Symphony Orchestras, aids in tuning. He moves around the room working with individual students, making corrections and giving tips on technique. He's a longtime SYSO coach and has worked with some of these kids since they were in elementary school. As the kids move through different scales, with Morales announcing note corrections and Mullikin adjusting fingers, the improvement in tuning is audible—and the kids can clearly hear it too, playing louder and more confidently by the minute.

"Having coaches there helps make more meaningful time of the class," Morales says. "When I didn't have that, it was 10 or 20 minutes of tuning some days, to then play for 10 minutes and spend half the time talking. It was a rough, rough learning process for me."

Coaches also help with time-consuming instrument repairs, which Morales previously dealt with himself. (They also help Morales, who's primarily a pianist and composer, improve his own string skills.) When it comes to something as specialized as playing a string instrument, nothing beats one-on-one instruction. Finally, these once-struggling school orchestras are beginning to thrive

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Seattle Youth Symphony Orchestras, colloquially known as SYSO, was founded in 1942, and is now one of the largest youth orchestra programs in the country. Today the group is comprised of four different orchestras: Symphonette, Debut Symphony, Junior Symphony and the prestigious flagship group, Seattle Youth Symphony. That top group performs an annual season at Benaroya Hall and is coached by professionals from Seattle Symphony musicians and local university staff.

In Seattle Public Schools, students can choose to start playing an instrument in fourth and fifth grade, says Allen. It's a pull-out program, which means that kids leave their regular classroom for music lessons during the school day, and it's taught by instrumental-music specialists sent from school to school by the district. These teachers, Allen explains, are on part-time contracts that allow each kid to get about a half-hour of music instruction a week—not nearly enough to make progress.

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things like quality instruments and private lessons, get more arts education. Those at a lower socioeconomic level go without.

SYSO is addressing this systemic imbalance with the newest iteration of its SYSO in the Schools program, which works in partnership with public schools to amplify music education. The first iteration, which launched 25 years ago, was the Endangered Instruments Program, which still sends professional musicians to middle schools and encourages kids to try out less-common instruments—to switch from violin to viola, for example, or from flute to French horn. Not only can kids find instruments they love, and thus will stick with, they may ultimately have more opportunity to play in an orchestra because, as SYSO's Director of Advancement and Sustainability Josef Krebs point out, "You cannot play Beethoven 9 without the bassoon."

Six years ago, a grant from the Wallace Foundation helped SYSO launch its Southwest Seattle Strings Project, bringing string coaches into eight schools, including Denny and Sealth. Teachers get much-needed help in the classroom and kids get specialized, sometimes one-on-one coaching, from a consistent roster of professionals, for free.

But funding's the trick: Donations made to the Endangered Instruments Program augment schools in the Southwest Strings program that can't otherwise afford extra instruction. "Systemic inequity is a big deal, and it's an issue that in our time we have to confront," Krebs says. "This is a purposeful strategy, because everything else in the broader societal system is designed to help rich families preserve their own assets around arts education." SYSO, a private nonprofit, staffed by specialists and unfettered by the funding woes, broad focus and red tape of the school district, can send professional teaching artists and necessary supplies, like shoulder rests and rosin, directly to the kids that need them most.

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SYSO is just one partner in an arts education system that is dizzyingly collaborative. Seattle Repertory Jazz Orchestra, which provides band coaches where SYSO provides string coaches, is another major Seattle Public Schools partner, along with Arts Corps, Seattle Symphony, Seattle Art Museum, Seattle Opera and Seattle Repertory Theatre. These organizations and many others are working with the Creative Advantage Initiative, a public/private partnership begun in fall 2013 (also seeded by a Wallace Foundation grant) between the school district, the city and countless outside partners, from community arts organizations to individual teaching artists.

"There's no ego in this," says Gail Sehlhorst, the visual and performing arts manager at Seattle Public Schools. "What leads the work is equitable access to the arts."

In an Oct. 2015 study by the University of Washington's Center for Reinventing Public Education, Seattle's public school system was revealed to be one of the least equitable in the country. An example: Over 34 percent of white students in Seattle attend an elementary or middle school with reading tests scores that rank in the top 20 percent of schools citywide, compared

to 3.4 percent of black students. The barriers to achieving basic educational equity are myriad, and when it comes to the arts they become even more complex, ranging from funding issues to rigid graduation requirements for high schoolers.

Schools with robust PTAs can fundraise to fill that funding gap. Sehlhorst explains that schools without fundraising PTAs can instead pay for arts classes using federal funds (called Title 1 funds) that go to high-need schools based on the percentage of their student body receiving free or reduced lunches, among other criteria. But there's a problem: These funds *can* be used for arts, but they don't have to be, and schools with tight budgets may need them for other education basics. Plus, some large schools fall in the middle—they might have 40 or 50 percent of their students getting free and reduced lunch, but still don't qualify for Title 1.

If you discuss public school music education on any systemic level, you'll hear the word "pathway" used *a lot*—meaning the route a child takes from elementary to middle to high school, and the resulting linear growth in skill-building. These problems of funding, equity and access are certainly not unique to music education, but music, particularly instrumental music, has an undeniable technical progression. You can begin learning fundamentals of drawing at any time in your life, but if you don't start learning instrumental technique in elementary school, you won't be able to play music at a middle school level, which

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started her job eight years ago, 23 of 52 elementary schools offered music education. That number is now 41.*

"A really important component of this work is creating a cultural shift," says Lara Davis, education manager for the Office of Arts & Culture. "There's been a de-investment in arts education for the last 30 years, so as we make these decisions around increased certificated arts instruction, materials and partnerships, it's really about engaging school leadership."

Pathways aren't just about developing skills; they're about changing the makeup of the city's decision makers. "If a person hasn't had an art experience in their life, then they don't have anything to connect to in terms of the relevance of art in a student's education," Sehlhorst says. "Right there you're also looking at the gaps in who has historically had access to the arts in their public education and in their outside life. We need to help people see the connective tissue between what happens when a student is engaged in art-making and their initiative."

Another huge part of fighting inequity is challenging assumptions about music in certain communities: that kids at schools with stellar music programs are somehow more passionate or more talented rather than wildly more advantaged.

When it comes to growing arts education, no one can do it alone. While Creative Advantage chips away at the holistic, systemic level, partner organizations and teachers can address immediate classroom needs and communities can rally to show political and financial support. The common goal is access and growing the capacity of each school to provide quality arts education to all kids. It's important to be strategic, but it's also important to act fast. "Every year we don't invest," says SYSO's Krebs, "it's another couple hundred kids who don't get music, who don't think they can make change."

In the Sealth orchestra room, scales have given way to a sight-reading exercise, from which emerges the halting strains of a simple concerto, punctuated by muffled giggles whenever someone biffs a note. Morales stops the kids for a quick conversation about key signatures and relative majors and minors, and they catch on fast. These students are learning and improving in real time—because they've been given the chance.

**An earlier version of this story stated that 39 elementary schools now have music education; the number is 41. We apologize for the error.*

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