

Music Education as a Tool for Youth Development  
Experiences in the Trenton Public Schools, NJ

by:  
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As I started working in the Trenton Public School system in 2011 I was hired as our school's only general music teacher. As a new teacher placed into an urban school with no supplies and almost no support for the performing arts teaching music was a daunting task. Without resources, achieving student engagement in the classroom was difficult and required creative lesson planning and a variety of classroom management techniques. In 2012 when the VH1 Save the Music Foundation began to work with our school district the value of instrumental music education in student's lives was apparent from the very beginning. The proper support and resources allowed the students of Grace A. Dunn Middle School to display not only a love of music, but the ability to belong to something larger than themselves. Their new found courage, resolve and strength of character gave them the ability to be part of our school's and quite possibly one of our school district's strongest programs in all areas of academia.

I would like to begin by introducing a student named Cesar Gonzalez. I met Cesar in his sixth grade general music class in 2011. He was an average student, in an average class and had no idea there was a love of music and a sense of belonging somewhere inside of him. When it was time to choose students to participate in instrumental music lessons I choose Cesar because he seemed like he was always up for a challenge or learning something new. A few things changed in Cesar since the beginning of his journey in instrumental music. The first noticeable change was in his self confidence and character development. He learned not only how to be part of a

team, but his natural leadership skills began to develop. Secondly, his ability to improve his academic standing was very apparent. By the time he reached high school he was able to sign up for all honors courses.

Currently, not only is Cesar an integral part of the Trenton High School Orchestra and district wide marching band but is also working a job to be able to purchase his own professional saxophone, mouthpiece and take private lessons. He has clearly communicated his goals of being a music major in college as well as making music a career in some aspect which is still unknown. Stories like Cesar's are not uncommon with music students in Trenton.

My second example of a student who is greatly affected by instrumental music is an eighth grade middle school music named Ramon Rodriguez. Ramon came to me in the beginning of his sixth grade year as a very shy and inexperienced student. At that point our instrumental music program was in its beginning stages and was organized as a pull out program instead of scheduled classes for the students. Ramon would often skip his trumpet lessons and was overwhelmed by the idea of playing an instrument. Over time his anxiety lessened and his desire to be involved in music increased. Currently, Ramon is the lead trumpet player in our middle school band, district wide marching band, performs occasionally with the high school orchestra, participates in choir and plays the piano and guitar. He is now known in our school of over one thousand students to be a musically gifted student by teachers and peers alike. Ramon is now also a straight A student as well as an athlete.

The differences instrumental music can make in a child's life is priceless in so many different areas. I have personally seen increases in student's self confidence,

leadership capabilities, character, attendance and in grades. Instrumental music in school's help children develop their own unique personality traits and allows them to be part of something bigger than themselves. These effects are much greater in low income urban areas such as Trenton, NJ.