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Tracy Begland: Music education hits all the right notes

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If there were a course to teach your child self-discipline, time management and self-reliance, would you enroll him? If this class would raise his SAT score by an average of 107 points and significantly increase his mathematics proficiency, is it worth your tax dollars? If that same course would place him in the group with the lowest lifetime and current use of alcohol, tobacco and illicit drugs, would you camp out to guarantee him a spot?

You don't have to. Just support the music programs in your school.

March is "Music in Schools" month. More than ever, taxes are being scrutinized, school budgets slashed. Even worse, parents have less discretionary funds for elective classes. Music and the arts are the first casualties in the battle for educational dollars. Before we unholster, load and blast a few more rounds at music and the arts, it's worth considering the value of music education.

Neither my husband nor I grew up in musical families. We didn't play piano. We didn't march in the band. We can't carry a tune with a forklift. Now we have two pianists, a French horn player, a bell chimer and a trombonist in our home. And that's just two kids' worth.

We've seen firsthand the benefits of participation in Coppell ISD's music program. Mastering an instrument does not provide instant gratification. Kids have to practice. Not for a day. Not for a week. For years.

Learning to play music is not a multi-tasking activity. My son completes his homework, listens to his [iPod](#) and watches YouTube simultaneously. Practicing his French horn, though, is a stand-alone task. Kids learn to perform solos: nervous, alone and with no one to depend on but themselves. Kids learn teamwork. They are held responsible for every note that comes out of every horn in their instrument section. Not without a cost: years of lessons, rehearsals, drive time, money and a little discomfort. Those first few months of practice brought a discordant din that that kept my husband at the office late.

In his book *What Music Means to Me*, Carrollton photographer Richard Rejino asked 43 musicians to describe the role of music in their lives. They ranged from 12 years old to retirement age. Each was photographed with his or her musical instrument.

"I had two goals: to celebrate the value of music in education and quality of life, and to give people who studied music a voice," Rejino told me.

As the project continued, he became more conscious of representing the kids in music programs. “Most of the people in this book will not go on to be professional musicians,” he said. “But music will play an important part in their lives.” It already has.

Austin is a percussionist who dropped the “essentials” of middle school life. In the book, he describes how he tuned out “computer games, TV and being popular” to get serious about music. “If there is a task ahead of me, due to my musical experience, I am not afraid to face it, no matter how daunting it may seem.”

Jonathan is a vocalist. “Music saved me from a life of trouble and heartache.” He grew up in a South Dallas neighborhood, hearing gunshots and altercations nightly. “I can live a life full of joy and prosperity, no matter where I live or grew up.”

Riley is a pianist searching for a way to reclaim herself. She has fought anorexia for 11 years. “When I play, all of my troubles disappear for a moment, and Riley shines through.”

It’s too late for some of us to enhance our SAT scores. But can music improve the quality of our lives? Ben, a violinist and guitarist, is also featured in Rejino’s book. He describes himself as “mute” before music provided him with a way to communicate. He credits music with “the spark I [need] to run throughout the day with a little kick in my step, a twinkle in my eye, a cherry on top.”

I’ll pick life with a cherry on top every time.

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