

Santa Rosa Symphony tries to drum up music in schools

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When Monroe Elementary School Principal Rachel Valenzuela was confronted with a student who was slow to get motivated for class work, she learned that he was particularly fond of the school's new music appreciation program.

Now, just months into the implementation of "It's Elementary" music, the boy is rewarded for improved focus by getting individual time in class listening to classical music on a pair of headphones.

It's an unusual — but effective — use of the new music curriculum sponsored by the Santa Rosa Symphony that provides campuses with CDs, curriculum outlines and at least two performances from ensembles per year, Valenzuela said.

"A lot of our kids haven't had that kind of exposure, or minimal exposure," Valenzuela said, noting the school has a limited music program.

"With all of the budget cuts, of course, the activities that ... have the least direct impact on the classroom are the first cut," she said.

The 10-year-old It's Elementary program is in place this year at Lincoln, Helen Lehman and Apple Blossom elementary schools in the Santa Rosa school district. The program at Monroe is being supported in part by the Kiwanis Club of Santa Rosa.

"We think it's part and parcel of overall education and overall attainment of any individual," said Creighton White, a member of the Santa Rosa Symphony board of directors and a vice president of the Santa Rosa Kiwanis Club. "We look at the fact that schools don't seem to be able to meet that need any more, so it's almost a vacuum that has to be stepped into from our particular perspective," he said.

"Music is math, it's tempo, the timing. It's also science, the science of sound and perhaps psychology. So all these things can be integrated from a musical standpoint into the curriculum," White said.

Teachers are given tools to teach fractions by counting musical beats, given social studies lessons through learning about the age in which pieces were composed, and language lessons by writing letters to long-dead composers.

The long-term effects of the program are subtle, said Ben Taylor, interim director of education for the symphony.

“It’s not necessarily crafted for somebody who is going to go bonkers for music, but for someone to get excited and know what it is,” he said. “A lot of these kids don’t know anything about classical music. One of the benefits of the program is that now they actually do know something about it.”

Valenzuela plays symphony pieces over the public address system every Monday. Some teachers use the music to help soothe students after a frenzied recess period, she said.

At Comstock Middle School, where the music program has been eliminated, Principal Jose Benitez said he looks forward to a new wave of Monroe graduates entering middle school primed to reignite the Crusaders’ music program.

“They are planting the seed for the students. When they reach middle school it’s important for us to continue that growth, so that when they reach Piner (High School) they are fully developed,” he said.

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