

MLL School Research Report

Norwalk-La Mirada Unified School District School Report: Rhythm Enhances Academic Learning (REAL)

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Introduction and Rationale

The Norwalk-La Mirada Unified School District (NLMUSD) is located in southeast Los Angeles County, about twenty minutes from downtown Los Angeles. In the 2009-2010 school year, the NLMUSD served approximately 22,000 students. The district comprises 28 schools, including 17 Elementary Schools, 6 Middle Schools, 3 High Schools, 1 Continuation High School, and 2 Adult Schools, and is very diverse, with 23% of the district's students learning English as a Second Language and representing 52 countries. There are 43 native languages spoken by students in the NLMUSD. Student ethnicity consists of the following distribution: 73% Hispanic, 11% White, 7% Asian, 3% African-American, and 6% other. 58% of the NLMUSD students qualify for Free or Reduced Lunch.

The mission of the Norwalk-La Mirada Unified School District is, in collaboration with parents and community, to develop in all students the knowledge, understanding, skills, and attitudes to empower them to become life-long learners and productive citizens in an ever-changing world. This will be accomplished in a climate that promotes high expectations, strives to meet individual needs, and values diversity.

History of the Project

The Music-in-Education project began in the summer of 2005 at the Julia B. Morrison Elementary School, which in partnership with the Music Center of Los Angeles County became part of the Music-in-Education National Consortium's Learning Laboratory School Network. Morrison Elementary, a Title 1 school located in the Norwalk-La Mirada Unified School District, was motivated by the desire to serve the school's students, build a school-wide music education program, and research/field test music learning models. The school enrollment was more than 600 students, serving grades K-6. The student population at Morrison Elementary was 88% Hispanic/Latino, and 40% of the students were classified as English Language Learners. Seven out of ten students lived below the poverty line, and four out of ten students had parents who did not graduate from high school. Morrison Elementary was confronting the same dilemma facing scores of schools nationally, as a significant percentage of its students demonstrated low levels of achievement in reading, language arts, and mathematics. Faced with a compelling need to find a solution, Morrison Principal Marsha Guerrero set out to design a program that would motivate learning and

improve student achievement. The school administration studied the substantial brain research regarding the connections between music and learning and as a result developed a special project that integrated music in to the core curriculum as a catalyst for improving student achievement.

In the summer of 2005, an elementary school principal and a high school music teacher decided to collaborate to add elementary students as part of a rhythm ensemble with high school students, using rhythm as a tool to close the achievement gap for economically disadvantaged students, a third of whom were English Learners. The research base for this project was inspired by the work of Martin Gardner who noted in "Music, Learning and Behavior: A Case for Mental Stretching" that "the right kind of music training can support some of the cognitive development on which math and reading progress depend, helping also with the development of social or personal skills" (Gardner 2003, *JLTM*). Two years later when the music teacher was asked to become a Teacher on Special Assignment (TOSA) in charge of the Visual and Performing Arts education for the district, an action research project began.

Rhythm Enhances Academic Learning (REAL)

The Rhythm Enhances Academic Learning (REAL) program was designed to integrate musical rhythm learning and performance into a tool used as a transfer point and bridge for students to access the fundamental cognitive skills needed for academic success. The program goal was to design a classroom(s) to serve a targeted group of economically disadvantaged English Language Learners and provide support using a non-traditional means of intervention. The program objective was to use music as a key to unlock the social emotional development of the students, to improve their use of meta-cognitive strategies and skills, and to increase their achievement in the formal academic curriculum. The program was developed to meet and best serve the economically disadvantaged long term English Learner, who has not been successful, both academically and socially. Rather than submerging the students in extra academic work, music (specifically rhythm) was used to lay the foundation to encourage students to acquire the skills needed to succeed in core academic areas and to create a classroom community of learners who support each other's development.

Primary Support for the REAL Project included Karen Calhoun, TOSA for the Visual and Performing Arts (VAPA); Marsha Guerrero, Principal on Special Assignment; Jean Rebholz, TOSA Literacy Coach; Nicole McCarthy-Hyde, Classroom Teacher; Elva Mendoza, Classroom Teacher; and Larry Scripp, Director and Principal Investigator of the MIENC. Also supporting the project was Bob Rayburn, Principal, Chavez Elementary School; Bart MacNeil, Principal, Dolland Elementary School; Yvette Cantu, Principal, Eastwood Elementary School; Dr. Jean Maddox, Principal, Foster Road Elementary School; Kristine Cvar, Principal, Glazier Elementary School; Rudy Gonzalez, Principal, Morrison Elementary School; and Michelle Centeneo, Principal, New River Elementary School.

In 2008-2009, a targeted 4th/5th grade intervention class at Morrison was formed, comprised of 25 English Language Learners with whom traditional methods had not been

successful in closing the achievement gap. All of the students came from an economically disadvantaged background; several were receiving special education services, and none believed they could succeed with grade level content. The project/study specifically worked with rhythm in a percussion/drum line type ensemble. The students (20 boys and 5 girls, 12 students in grade 4 and 13 students in grade 5) received a weekly 45-minute drum line class that required them to focus on playing complicated polyrhythms. The TOSA immediately recognized after working with the students that they were lacking basic cognitive skills (ability to focus, attention span, listening skills, memorization, problem solving) needed for learning both musically and academically. The classroom teacher and the TOSA thus worked together to make intentional, strategic, and explicit correlations between the skills that students needed to achieve drum line proficiency and the skills needed to achieve academic proficiency. (For more on this project please see Calhoun 2008, the Morrison/Norwalk School report on the CMIE website, http://musiclearningleadership.com/book/lsln_reports/LLSN_Report_Morrison_Calhoun.pdf).

In 2009-2010 the NLMUSD attempted to investigate a different model of integrating music into the core curriculum that would serve as a catalyst for motivating learning and improving overall student achievement in the academic content areas. The model, which was used in the past MIENC research proposals, was based on a partnership with an arts organization. Based on what we have learned from past MIENC research, the new project is designed to train classroom teachers to use rhythm as a tool that is used as a bridge and transfer point to help students access the fundamental cognitive skills needed for academic success. At the same time the NLMUSD is investigating a model for sustainable change, which will ensure that elementary students receive regular weekly music lessons that include both rhythmic, and melodic components (with an emphasis on rhythm) at each grade level.

Research Questions

The Norwalk Unified School District's research questions for the 2009-2010 REAL project were:

(1) Can Music PLUS Music Integration projects (specifically rhythm projects) help to bridge the achievement gap, particularly with Long Term English Language Learners?

(2) To what extent can skills acquired in working with rhythmic patterns and beats be transferred to improve reading fluency and increased reading comprehension?

(3) Can Music PLUS Music Integration projects support some of the cognitive development for struggling English Language Learners, as well as help with the development of social and personal skills?