

The **Norwalk-La Mirada Unified School District (NLMUSD)** is located in South-East Los Angeles County, about 20 minutes from downtown Los Angeles. In the 2009-2010 school year, the NLMUSD served approximately 22,000 students. Our Schools total 28, including 17 Elementary Schools, 6 Middle Schools, 3 High Schools, 1 Continuation High School, and 2 Adult Schools. We are a very diverse school district with 23% of our students learning English as a Second Language, 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.

History of the Project: The project began in the summer of 2005 with Julia B. Morrison Elementary School, who in partnership with the Music Center of Los Angeles County, became part of the Music In Education National Consortium's Learning Laboratory Schools 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 is more than 600 students, serving grades K-6. The student population at Morrison Elementary is 88% Hispanic/Latino, and 40% of the students are classified as English Language Learners. Seven out of ten students live below the poverty line, and four out of ten students have parents who did not graduate from high school. Some years ago, Morrison Elementary was confronting the same dilemma facing scores of schools nationally: 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 integrates music into 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. That's where the journey of using rhythm as a tool to close the achievement gap for economically disadvantaged students, a third of whom are English Learners began. The research base for our belief came from the work of Martin Gardner who wrote 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". Two years later when the music teacher was asked to become a TOSA in charge of the Visual and Performing Arts education for the district, an action research project began.

Primary Support for the REAL Project included a) Karen Calhoun, Teacher On Special Assignment (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 Script, 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 Centeno, Principal, New River Elementary School.

Description of the Program: **Rhythm Enhances Academic Learning (REAL)** is a program designed to integrate musical rhythm learning and performance, into a tool that is used as a transfer point and bridge for students to access the fundamental cognitive skills needed for academic success.

The mission of the Norwalk-La Mirada Unified School District, in collaboration with parents and community, shall 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.

Program Goal: 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 for acquiring the skills needed to succeed in core academic areas and create a classroom community of learners who supported each other's development.

Inquiry/Research Questions:

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 also helping with the development of social and personal skills?

4) What effect does Music plus Music Integration planning, teaching and assessing have on the professional development of classroom teachers?

The NLMUSD is currently focusing on a District Wide Academic Achievement Improvement Plan. With the help of the VAPA TOSA, what the NLMUSD is attempting to do is investigate a different model of integrating music into the core curriculum (*Principle #1: Re-form Educational Practice; Principle #2: Promote Site-based change*) that will serve as a catalyst for motivating learning and improving overall achievement (*Principle #3: Focus on the School and its Community*) in the academic content areas. The model, which was used in past MIENC projects, was based on a partnership with an arts organization. The new model/project is designed to include both rhythmic and melodic components at each grade level, which will require the use of guided interns (*Principle #4: Reinvent Schools as Learning Laboratories*).

At the same time the NLMUSD is investigating a model for sustainable change which will ensure that elementary teachers are trained to integrate music (with a focus on rhythm) into the core curriculum (*Principle #5: Create Music Learning Leadership Teams to Sustain Innovative Practice; Principle #8: Provide Diverse Strategies for Teaching and Learning*), while specifically working on cognitive learning skills that transfer into core curriculum achievement.

In 2008-2009, a targeted 4th/5th grade intervention class 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 of whom were receiving special education services, and none of whom believed they could succeed with grade level content. The project/study specifically works with rhythm in an percussion/drum line type ensemble. The students (20 boys and 5 girls, 12 students in grade 4 and 13 students in grade 5) would receive a weekly 45 minute drum line class, which demanded that they focus on playing complicated poly-rhythms. 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 worked together to make intentional, strategic and explicit correlations between the skills that students needed to successfully achieve drum line proficiency, and the skills needed to successfully achieve academic proficiency.

In 2009-2010 the project/study continued with a 5th/6th grade intervention class, with approximately half the students coming from the 2008-2009 4th/5th

grade intervention class from the previous year. The class again was made up of all English Language Learners. There were 23 students total (15 boys and 8 girls). 17 of the students were 5th grade, and 6 students were 6th grade. The classroom teacher moved up the grade levels with the students, so immediate work began with the student's cognitive skills. In 2009-2010 a second intervention class was also added. This class had 24 students (12 boys and 12 girls) 11 of whom were in grade 5, and 13 of whom were in grade 4. Each class received a 45 minute percussion/drum line rhythm class once a week, which once again demanded that they focus on playing together complicated poly-rhythms.

We began to notice that students in the intervention class/classes were improving not only in the drum line musically, but also academically in the classroom. We attribute this academic growth to the fact that the REAL project specifically targeted the development of student cognitive and social emotional skills (self discipline, tenacity, motivation, listening skills, attention span, ability to focus, memorization, visual skills, problem solving, etc.) that are needed to advance learning, but frequently are not targeted in the academic arena.

It is our contention that insufficient attention continues to be paid to struggling students in the area of basic, fundamental cognitive skills. These skills must first be in place in order to build a foundation from which students can access the critical thinking skills necessary for academic success. In our REAL project, students learn these skills through mastering complex musical rhythms, and then the classroom teachers make explicit connections to the same skills needed in the academic arena. For example, if a student can focus during the REAL drum line class, he or she can focus during core subject learning and tasks. Thus a teaching for transfer process occurs. Once these skills are grasped, they can be maintained, built upon, and sustained.

The report and documentation below shows the English Language Arts Benchmark growth for the REAL project classrooms for both years (2008-2009/2009-2010). You will notice a significant decrease in the number of students scoring Far Below and Below Basic, and an increase in the number of students scoring Basic and Proficient. As stated before, we attribute this academic growth to the fact that the REAL program specifically targeted the development of student cognitive and social emotional skills that are needed to advance learning.

[Rethinking the Essential Role of Music in Education 2010 Final \(2\).doc](#)

The REAL program/project is very innovative, and shows transformation of teaching practices, for two main reasons:

- 1. It focuses on how to use music (specifically rhythm) to bridge the achievement gap.**
- 2. It deliberately integrates skills found in the hidden curriculum (social/emotional development) as well as the meta-curriculum (learning processes) with academic demands of the formal curriculum (reading, writing, and mathematics).**

During the summer of 2009 the VAPA TOSA collaborated with one of the District's Literacy Coaches on how the knowledge gained from the pilot project and our national partnership could be applied to other sites. They collaboratively designed a professional development in-service to train elementary classroom teachers on how to integrate music, with a focus on rhythm and dance, while specifically working on cognitive learning skills that transfer into core curriculum achievement.

During the 2009-2010 school year, they trained six elementary school staffs (Pre K to 5th grade, including Special Day Class teachers) and two middle school music staff in the district. Most of the elementary participants had none or limited experience with musical rhythm training. They understood immediately how the skills learned in the REAL professional development in-services could help increase the cognitive and social emotional development of all students.

The reaction to the professional development has been overwhelmingly positive. In the words of one teacher, "*I can do this. It makes sense for kids*".

The following links contain the Professional Development Agendas for the Rhythm and Dance In-Service training for the NLMUSD Elementary Teachers.

[VAPA rhythm dance K-2 agenda Foster Rd 2 11 10\(1\)\(2\).doc](#)

[VAPA rhythm dance 3-5 agenda Foster Rd 11 11 10 \(2\)\(1\).doc](#)

The REAL drum line has performed for the community at various venues including school sites, the NLMUSD Honor Band Concert, and at meetings of the School Board. Drum line lessons have been observed by music educators from other states, as well as other parts of California.

In March 2009 and then again in March 2010, the VAPA TOSA shared our REAL project work with Music, Arts, and School Administrators from both Los Angeles and Orange Counties. Also in March 2010, the VAPA TOSA and the classroom

teacher for the REAL project presented the REAL information at a learning session for the California Music Educators Association State Conference in Sacramento. The VAPA TOSA was contacted by REMO Percussion Instruments and was asked to share our information about the REAL project. REMO is constantly interested in innovative research regarding rhythm and percussion in education.

In conclusion, as stated before, it is our contention that insufficient attention continues to be paid to struggling students in the area of basic, fundamental cognitive skills. These skills must first be in place in order to build a foundation from which students can access the critical thinking skills necessary for academic success. In the REAL process, students learn these skills through mastering complex musical rhythms, and then the classroom teachers make explicit connections to the same skills needed in the academic arena. For example, if a student can focus during drum line, he or she can focus during core subject learning and tasks. Thus a teaching for transfer process occurs. Once these skills are grasped, they can be maintained, built upon, and sustained.