



# Command Performance

Colorado school makes music a gateway to improvement in all academic areas

By Nicole Petersen

Simply stated, music *matters*. It matters tremendously to the students we serve at Brentwood Middle School in Greeley, Colorado. It matters to the hundreds of parents and families who pack the gym at Greeley Central High School to watch their beginning musicians play an instrument in public for the first time. It matters to the members of our community who are able to enjoy our annual performances at Greeley's Veterans Day celebration, the Big Band Boogie Ball, and countless other events. Music matters.

## Downplaying Disadvantages

To some people, our students would appear to be at a disadvantage

when compared to some of their middle-level peers across the state. Over 70 percent of students in our school are eligible for free or reduced meals, and just over 15 percent are English-language learners. Only four years ago, based on state assessment data, our school was at the second-lowest state rating and had been for two years prior. The accountability clock was ticking.

At Brentwood Middle School, our faculty and staff never stopped believing that our wonderfully resilient and hard-working Bengals could show tremendous growth in English language arts and math. So we worked together

as a team to come up with a strategy to help our students succeed, and we made dramatic instructional shifts in our classrooms.

One particularly important shift was to increase access to music education classes for all of our students—every one of them. Our schedule had been designed to increase targeted instruction time, but we realized that it had come at the expense of time in elective courses. Students who tested below grade level in reading and/or math—a large percentage of our student population—had the opportunity to take only one elective, which meant music had to compete with

other elective courses such as physical education, art, and technology.

With the change, targeted instruction became its own block of time, during which we focus on intervention support and extended learning opportunities such as our school's jazz band. We made it an expectation for all students to take at least one semester in the performing arts (band, choir, or orchestra), and what we learned was powerful.

### Equal Aptitude

Because the vast majority of our students had never really touched an instrument before they entered sixth grade, music ensemble participation at our school quickly became an even playing field. Since all students came into performing arts classes with little to no experience, they were able to grow together as they learned. Music has become a place where our students find that hard work and grit open doors.

Students who had struggled for years in reading, writing, or math suddenly showed a newly acquired confidence and belief that they could learn and grow—and not just in performing arts classes. In music, they saw the direct result of their efforts come to fruition and carried the same growth mindset into their core classes. With hard work and commitment, the possibilities in the classroom—and outside of it—were endless.

In music classes, a certain degree of discipline is required for successful ensemble performances, which require students to commit to a product bigger than themselves. They sit quietly and learn from others receiving instruction and feedback. They transfer this persistence and perseverance from learning an instrument into their core classes.

### Overall Improvement

Achievement in reading and math began to climb, and in 2017, students at Brentwood Middle School had so much growth that our school was

recognized as a Center of Excellence by the Colorado Department of Education. At the same time, students in our symphony orchestra were invited to perform at the opening of the Colorado Association of School Boards' winter convention.

Of course, we have had tremendous support from district leadership and the community. And it doesn't hurt that our school's music educators are top-notch. They solicit volunteers to work with our musicians one-on-one and in small groups, supplementing our limited resources with community connections. Music, supplies, instruments, and transportation all come at a cost, but it is well worth it. Of the 630 students who are enrolled in Brentwood Middle School today, more than 90 percent are taking a music class.

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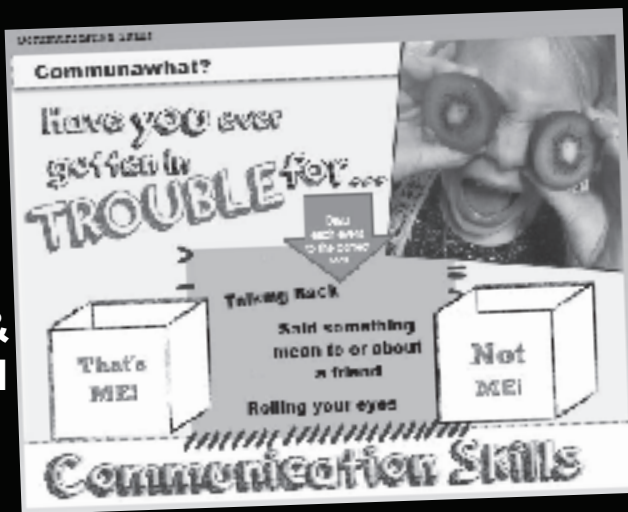
This year, we are celebrating our third year at the state's highest performance rating—and it is thanks, in large part, to music education. It has taught our students more than just how to play an instrument. It has instilled in them a sense of pride, connection, excellence, competition, grit, aesthetic appreciation, and *fun!* And that's why we say that music matters. **P**

Nicole Petersen is principal of Brentwood Middle School in Greeley, Colorado.

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