

Researchers Suggest New Models for Music Education

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(PhysOrg.com) -- Preteens and teenagers today are involved in music in ways that never could have been imagined 50 years ago. Yet America's secondary school music education programs remain strikingly similar to those of five decades ago, according to the author of a national study in the latest issue of the *Journal of Research in Music Education*.

"The digital revolution has changed how adolescents acquire, listen to, and, in many cases, make music," says Northwestern University music education specialist Carlos Abril. "But, in most of America's secondary schools, participation in big ensembles -- whether concert band or chorus -- remains the principal way that school programs involve students in music."

Abril, assistant professor of music education at Northwestern's Henry and Leigh Bienen School of Music, is co-author, with Indiana University's Brent Gault, of "The State of Music in Secondary Schools: The Principal's Perspective." The study -- one of a handful of national studies of secondary school music education and the first to look at it from the principal's perspective -- surveyed more than 500 principals from representative urban, suburban and rural middle and high schools across the country.

The researchers found that while 98 percent of secondary schools offer music programs, only one in three require students to take part in them. They also found that rural schools and schools with high enrollments of students of lower socioeconomic status are least likely to offer a wide

variety of music classes.

“The students who lack the means to formally study music outside school also are the ones least likely to be able to study it in school,” says Abril.

While band is offered in 93 percent of secondary schools and chorus in 88 percent, classes in music technology -- a way of linking student interest in computers to music learning -- are offered in only one in 10 schools. Courses in guitar were available in one of five schools; classes in piano/keyboard in 13 percent of schools. At only 7 percent of schools, classes in music composition are offered even less frequently.

The study found that large ensemble instruction, which typically focuses on the group rather than the individual, remains the most pervasive form of music education in secondary schools. Smaller sized music classes focused on the individual (guitar, piano, composition) are far less common.

“At a time when youngsters are exposed to music as never before and a growing body of research suggests they want to create and play their own music, we find that principals report that creating music (the creative side of music education) is the music learning outcome they see least often in their schools,” Abril says. Other survey and observational studies corroborate the finding.

Not surprisingly -- with band and chorus the primary vehicles for secondary music education -- principals rank performance skills as the most successfully met music learning outcomes.

In band and chorus, students typically are asked to perform and reproduce the music of others and not to create their own music. While many youngsters thrive in such programs, others may find that approach to learning music incompatible with the ways they engage with music in

their everyday lives.

“Whether it’s using their iPods, downloading music off the Internet, composing music on laptops, or playing video games like ‘Guitar Hero,’ technology has significantly changed the way adolescents engage with and come to understand music,” Abril says.

“That seems to indicate it may be time to rethink the models we are using to engage students in music at the middle and high school levels. In so doing, we might find alternative ways to interest students who would not normally enroll in traditional school music programs,” Abril says.

In effect, a significant number of students today may be turned off to the formal study of music in school because it seems irrelevant to them. Students often talk about “real music” versus “school music” as if the two have nothing in common.

Other findings of the study:

Standardized tests and No Child Left Behind legislation are viewed as having the most negative impact on music programs.

Scheduling issues are cited almost as frequently as budgeting problems as having negative impacts on music programs.

Suburban schools have the highest number of music specialists per school; rural schools have the fewest.

More middle schools (58 percent) require music than high schools (18 percent) or schools with other combinations of grade levels (49 percent).

While 51 percent of principals report that the decision to have a music specialist at their school is made beyond the school level (i.e. school

board or state board), a surprisingly large number (36 percent) of principals report that they are charged with the decision to hire a music specialist at their school.

Principals considered students, parents and music teachers to have very positive effects on their programs.

Provided by Northwestern University

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