

Symphony in San Antonio

How one school district raised standards and opened doors to music education

Snip! The ribbon parted and fell to the ground, cleanly cut by a dozen pairs of scissors. Applause and confetti filled the evening air, replacing the mariachi music heard moments earlier. The dedication ceremony for the new Center for Music Education at Brackenridge High School was the culmination of years of hard work.

The center was the first of eight such facilities to open in 2005, one for each high school in the San Antonio Independent School District. Given its scope and the grassroots effort that made it a reality, this impressive arts construction project symbolizes a new beginning and new opportunities for San Antonio's students.

I first discovered our district music program a decade earlier, when my youngest daughter played in the high school band. When my career allowed time for volunteering, I joined the high school band boosters. As with any volunteer activity, the more you do, the deeper your involvement becomes, and I woke up one morning as the group's president.

In that role, I learned about the many benefits of fine arts in education. According to Hector Ponce, the district's arts coordinator at the time, students in cocurricular activities like the arts perform better on standardized tests, have more consistent school attendance, volunteer more, and are more likely to develop into community leaders than those who don't participate in the arts and other cocurricular activities.

Before long, I found myself at the forefront of Citizens for Better Bands, a districtwide group that focused initially on building music instruments into the district's budget. We did our homework, surveyed other districts by phone, and learned we were spending less on instruments per student than the poorest districts in Texas. Some of our students' instruments were held together with paper clips, toothpicks, or rubber

bands. We presented our findings to the school board, including evidence on how music students excel academically with fewer discipline problems. The board responded by adding a line item for instrument replacement.

But we needed to broaden our reach to tackle other issues as well. I met with the seven other district band booster presidents and enlisted their help, a convergence that ultimately produced the Fine Arts Coalition in 1998, a districtwide charter organization encompassing all of the arts.

A VISION FOR THE FUTURE

In 1997, voters approved a \$483 million bond, a sizeable portion of which went to upgrade the district's aging facilities. Consequently, little was left to renovate the eight music facilities. Knowing that the \$4 million allocated would be inadequate, the council asked the board to delay any music facility improvements. We knew the first step needed to be an assessment of the existing conditions. While we had successfully lobbied for funds to replace instruments, we knew the facility effort had to be much more comprehensive.

We approached Pfluger Associates Architects, a local firm with extensive experience in educational facility planning and design, about developing a master plan for our music program. Committees, both at the district level and at each high school, worked with the firm to create a vision, drawing on site visits to other schools and resources like Wenger's Planning Guide for Secondary Music Facilities. In the end, almost 100 people took part in the process, which produced a two-volume, 340-page report. Our conclusions were concisely summed up in a spreadsheet that clearly showed our facilities were sadly lacking in size, condition, and quality compared to those of comparable high schools.



Our rehearsal halls, for example, were too small to support all of the students in any one group. Smaller programs, such as orchestra and mariachi, had to send their members into the hallway or cafeteria to practice. Acoustical isolation was also an issue—sounds traveled far too easily between music rooms and nearby areas. At one high school, noise from adjacent HVAC equipment could be heard inside the band hall.

We learned that adequate physical space—specifically, cubic volume—is the single most important factor for good design in a music suite. John Walton, the assistant band director at San Antonio's Edison High School, possesses a wealth of knowledge and informed us that the use of percussion in band compositions has increased dramatically in the last 50 years. This growth requires additional space to accommodate the instruments and the sound they generate. Rehearsal rooms that are too small or have ceilings that are too low are musically unresponsive and even dangerously loud. Even with acoustic fine-tuning, these flaws may be impossible to correct. But beyond space and sound isolation issues, we knew we also

needed to address audio and visual capabilities and touch on the burgeoning electronic music technology if we wanted to bring our music program not only up to date but into the future.

AN UNPRECEDENTED EFFORT

The master plan included models of the proposed facilities, complete with site plans, drawings, and cost estimates that pegged the entire project at \$41.5 million. The board endorsed the plan in the summer of 2000, without a financial commitment or timetable.

The Fine Arts Council now had a road map for the future—we knew our destination and the cost involved. How to get there was the next question, which Superintendent Rubén Olivárez quickly posed to me. I didn't have an immediate answer. But a week and several phone calls later, I had the vice-presidents of a major banking conglomerate in his office. Olivárez told me later it was that kind of doggedness that convinced the board to trust the council and include the music fa-



The new Center for Music Education at San Antonio's Brackenridge High School (previous page) was the first of eight such facilities to open this year. Above, a young violinist takes advantage of the facility's open hallways for a little practice.

cilities in the 2003 referendum. Our next task was convincing the voters.

Olivárez says persuading the business community to support the bond proved to be one of the biggest challenges of the referendum campaign. "Many questioned why new music facilities were necessary," he recalls. The council had its work cut out for it.

Just as we had compared instrument budgets and facilities with those in similar districts, the Fine Arts Council helped research comparative data on student participation, program offerings in the arts, and the correlation between arts involvement and academic performance. The architects we worked with were careful to involve the public in the process, which helped us make good decisions and build consensus.

The approach worked: Voters approved the \$128 million bond by an 85 percent margin. Surprisingly, many of the referendum's strongest critics are now some of the district's biggest supporters. "They now understand the importance of an integrated, well-balanced curriculum," Olivárez says.

Construction began in 2004, and earlier this year, the first two Centers for Music Education opened at Edison and Brackenridge high schools. The six remaining facilities are scheduled for completion this fall. Each center includes dedicated space

for band, mariachi, choir, and orchestra and includes—among other features—large and small rehearsal halls, modular practice rooms, teaching studios, a MIDI lab, and a music library. In addition, there are areas to store instruments, uniforms, color guard equipment, and risers.

Throughout the planning, design, and construction process, including the inevitable budget challenges and compromises, district music staff insisted that proper acoustics be a top priority. They were not disappointed.

The music practice rooms are a good example. Each new facility features 17 to 19 pre-manufactured, sound-isolating practice rooms—including one with active acoustics technology, which replicates the acoustics of various performance environments by electronic means. Other highlights include sound doors that passed rigorous and independent testing, masonry walls, walls that extend to the ceiling deck, and extra-thick walls and ceilings in high-noise areas like the percussion room.

THE GIFT OF MUSIC

These new Centers for Music Education have elevated the standards for our students—improving the way they look, behave, and perform—and elevated the fine arts culture in our district.

Local colleges and universities have taken notice, offering commitments of support including additional student teachers with top-level credentials. Our district and several institutions are currently discussing additional music-related initiatives, including master class teachers, grants, and a possible six-year program in which student teachers are hired by the district as teaching assistants and graduate with a master's degree and a year of experience.

A former band director in our district once told me our students would never play well enough to perform Gershwin's famous "Rhapsody in Blue," which happens to be one of my favorite pieces. I don't like people putting limits on our students. Unfortunately, this kind of negative talk is pervasive and insidious. Even worse, our students pick up on it. It takes a few strong-willed and dedicated individuals to break the cycle. We managed that in San Antonio, proving that when parents, teachers, and administrators come together, the results can be phenomenal.

At Brackenridge High School's dedication ceremony, I was delighted when the students in all of the school's bands played my favorite Gershwin tune. It was the faculty's way of thanking me for my role in the effort. It was one of the nicest gifts I have ever heard.

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