



EDUCATION: Music lessons returning to some elementary schools

Five years after slashing the program, Val Verde has restarted its music program for elementary students as other schools move in same direction

BY IMRAN GHORI / STAFF WRITER

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Five years after elementary school music classes were cut at Val Verde Unified School District, teachers are breaking out mothballed instruments and students are raising their voices in song.

Music instruction at the district's 12 elementary campuses resumed with the start of school in late August along with three teachers hired to lead third-, fourth- and fifth-graders in lessons.

The district, which includes parts of Perris, Moreno Valley and Mead Valley, eliminated the program in 2008-09 because of state budget cuts. But recent changes in state funding formulas for schools allowed for more local spending decisions and the district restarted the program this year, Superintendent Juan Lopez said.

"The kids are truly excited," Lopez said. "We're giving the kids something they wouldn't get if the school district didn't provide it. Very few kids are getting private music instruction."

The sounds of instruments and young vocals will again be heard locally beyond Val Verde's classrooms.

Moreno Valley Unified School District, which also slashed music programs in recent years, approved the hiring of a visual and performing arts coordinator who should be on staff by October, Assistant Superintendent Martinrex Kedziora said. Officials also hope to hire at least one teacher.

"We're in a restoration mode right now," he said.

LESSONS WANING

In the past decade, California public schools have seen a 50 percent drop in students enrolled in music classes because of budget cuts, said Joe Landon, executive director of the California Alliance for Arts Education. But with the new spending flexibility, school districts are finding that arts programs better help fulfill some of the state priorities.

“We are beginning to climb out of that hole,” Landon said. “We are cautiously optimistic that things are starting to turn around.”

Some Inland districts, such as Riverside Unified and Murrieta Valley Unified, kept music programs alive despite tough budget years because officials felt it was a priority. Others, such as Val Verde, kept only middle and high school music programs.

Anna Meza, vice president for advocacy for the Corona-Norco PTA Council, said she’s concerned that there’s not enough money for arts programs in the Corona-Norco Unified School District. Meza, the parent of a fifth-grader at Eisenhower Elementary School, said she hopes the new funding formulas will prompt changes.

“The arts needs a voice, be it music, be it dance, be it visual,” she said. “This is the best opportunity to speak up.”

The PTA council sponsored an arts festival Saturday that Meza said she hopes will expose kids to arts while also increasing awareness of the need for more funding.

A Corona-Norco Unified School District administrator could not be reached for comment last week.



In Val Verde, Lopez said the impact of the cuts was felt in higher grades as well.

“Middle schools were really suffering because they weren’t getting kids that really knew music,” he said.

Now, the three new teachers will each be responsible for four schools and visit a different campus each day of the week. Each school will also have a choir and band made up of fourth-graders.

One recent morning at Manuel L. Real Elementary School in Perris, teacher Amy Morgan led third-graders through their first day of music classes.

Using a squirrel hand puppet to help her at times, Morgan started with lessons on basic music concepts. She explained the difference between a speaking voice and singing voice and how to keep musical time with their heartbeats. She had the students seated on the floor clap their thighs in time to a country Western instrumental recording she played, and invited them to the front of the classroom to play the xylophone.

Morgan, who had been reassigned to teach second grade when the music program was cut, said students were quickly picking up how to use their singing voices and noted how much fun they were having.

“It’s fantastic to be able to have the opportunity to give the experience back to the students of learning music,” she said.

Music instruments for the elementary programs had been stored in the district’s warehouse for the past five years. Most remained in good shape, said Lou Randall, the district’s Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts and Mathematics coordinator,

He said music instruction helps students do well in other classes.

“There’s much research showing that the right side of the brain – the art part of education – will help with critical thinking,” Randall said.

Kedziora agreed, saying students involved in music programs tend to do better academically, don’t have discipline problems and have parents who are involved with their school.

“We know with students, people who are in band or music, they do better in school,” Kedziora said. “They’re connected with something.”