

## Educators Say High School Band Students Have Advantages in Several Ways

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LAKELAND | As students find their way through the maze of public school, music educators say they hope many of them will find light at the end of the tunnel in the form of participation in band.

The number of students who sign up for band seems to have declined recently, but local educators say they are hopeful the strong benefits of band will continue to lure students in to the classes.

Beth Cummings, senior coordinator for music for the Polk County School District, said there are many good reasons to join band classes, and educators continue to emphasize those advantages. Students learn to play an instrument and become more knowledgeable about music, but that's just a small part of what being in band can offer, Cummings said. "What we see is that the students become more self-assured," she said. "Band students are problem-solvers. They understand a sense of community and working together, and these are all the skills employers are looking for. They get that sense of being a part of something. Our kids today don't have that any other place."

Studies have shown that students who participate in music classes make better grades, score higher on FCAT and SAT exams and are more likely to stay in school and graduate from high school.

"They are accountable to someone else," Cummings said. "We do hold them academically responsible. We believe in educating the whole child. They are learning the higher-order thinking; being able to listen to things critically. So many things transfer over to other academics."

And, brothers Jose and Jesus Martinez say, it's a lot of fun. The 17-year-old twins, seniors at International Baccalaureate at Bartow High School, started band in the sixth grade. Jesus plays the trumpet and Jose plays the clarinet.

"The middle school band came and did like a show for the elementary school and I thought that was pretty cool," Jesus said.

The boys have a lot of friends in band. "We know everyone," Jesus said.

Jose, a classical music kind of guy, said band has definitely enriched the high school years. "It's actually really fun. I'm in it for the music," he said.

Cummings stressed that learning about music covers much more ground than just music education.



*Rick Runion | The Ledger*

Jeff Cayer directs middle school musicians during the Southwest Middle School Summer Band Camp at the school in Lakeland, Florida, Tuesday, July 30, 2013. The camp is open to all middle school band students from any school.

"Music is not just one thing. It intermingles with so many things: culture, history, reading music, history of music. What we want to do is expand their horizons and help them appreciate the things that we have that make us Americans," she said.

Polk County had about 6,000 students enrolled in band for the 2012-2013 school year, indicating there's no danger of bands vanishing anytime soon. But Cummings said there is a concern about recent dips. "We are seeing some decline," she said. "My opinion is that it's just a tough economy right now."

Concerns about being able to afford instruments keep some students out of band, she said. But the schools strive to prevent that from happening. Any student who really wants to participate in band should speak with his or her band director or visit a guidance counselor to see what can be done, she said.

"We have done some things through the years in the Department of Fine Arts to try and offset that," she said. "In the past few years, funds have been set aside to buy smaller instruments that parents and students would typically expect parents and students to rent, such as the clarinet, flute, or trumpet.

"We're trying to find different ways to offset this so that money is not the issue. But certainly we need more help in that regard."

Another factor that seems to be keeping some students out of band is lower Florida Comprehensive Assessment Tests (FCAT) scores, she said. "I see as being a big problem the state requirement of remedial classes for students who score below a 3 on FCAT," she said. "If they score a 1 or 2, they have to take those classes, and that takes away an elective from a child. I think that's a big part of the decline."

Jeffrey Cayer, band director at Southwest Middle School, is very passionate about his work and strongly believes that band participation helps shape many students in a positive way. "I'm proud of many of my students that have gone on to do other things," he said. "The lessons they've learned in my classroom contribute to making them successful adults."

Students often struggle to fit in during middle school and high school years, educators say, and band provides them with a "home base" that offers social structure, a self-esteem boost, a way to learn about working with others and just have a good time.

Cayer said band gave him a way to fit in himself as a young student. "That kid who didn't exactly fit in? That was me, that's what got me in the band and in the music field," he said.

He worries that interest in band could be dwindling, and hates to see students pass up the opportunity for such a positive experience. "I think that one of the reasons behind that is we live in a world of instant gratification," he said. "But band is not instant gratification. And the payoffs are so huge."

#### Creating group contributors

Students do not have to be musical geniuses to get into band or to enjoy it. Cummings said band directors can find a place for students who want to participate.

Cayer agreed that it's not about finding the very best of music students, although admittedly there's nothing wrong with coming across a student with exceptional ability. "My philosophy, and I think most of the band directors in the county's philosophy, is not to create professional musicians," he said.

"We are just trying to teach and create group contributors to society through the medium of music."

He and other band directors visit fifth-grade students and talk about band, introducing them to the basics of participation. They try to clear up some misconceptions — a common one being that if you take band, you won't have time for anything else.

"Our calendar usually does not conflict with other extracurricular activities," he said. "If you want to be in band, you can almost always work it out."

Cayer has band camp each summer at Southwest, as do several other schools in the county. He says band camp is a great way to introduce students to the program and initiate them.

Band camp is also underway in Lake Wales for students who are part of the Lake Wales Highlander Marching Band. Camp will continue until school starts.

Information posted about the camp indicates it would certainly help discipline students after summer vacation. Organizers advise that camp activities will take place from 7 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Friday, and students should come prepared for heat, with drinking water in jugs or bottles.

It's too late to get into these summer program this year, but there's time to enroll in band for the fall, Cayer said.

His own numbers have gone down since he became band director in 1995, he says, and he would love to see a boost.

"My first couple of years I was running about 200 in the band," he said. "Now I am seeing a steady decline, mostly due to finances and students that realize that band is truly hard work. It's truly something you have to practice, not instant gratification. They have to dedicate themselves to it."

It's a bit tricky to try and pinpoint figures on band enrollment; numbers kept do not include sixth-graders, and students can be counted twice if they perform a solo and in a group. Some schools appear to have increases in recent years, others have declines.

These are some bragging points provided by the Polk County School District's Department of Fine Arts in a recent "state of the arts" report. They are:

Polk has 174 music teachers.

Tenoroc Marching band received its first overall superior rating at Marching Band Music Performance Assessment.

Lake Gibson High School Band received straight superiors at the Marching Band Music Performance Assessment.

Mulberry High School Band increased from 47 members in 2008 to 121 in 2012, which is 12 percent of the school's enrollment.

Bartow High School Band received the Otto J. Kraushaar Award for straight superior ratings at all Music Performance Assessments for 2011-2012.

"We want to continue to get the word out about band," Cayer said. "So many aspects of life are challenging; band is a way to help keep young people invested in stability,

and enrich their lives at the same time."

## **BENEFITS OF BAND PARTICIPATION**

According to studies published by the Center for Fine Arts Education, band students fare better in many ways than those who do not take music classes.

**Better grades:** Students involved in music throughout high school had average GPAs exceeding 3.0, compared to students with no music classes averaging GPAs below 2.6.

**Higher graduation rates:** Students with no music credits in high school graduated with a diploma 70 percent of the time. But high school music students had a graduation rate higher than 94 percent.

**Staying in school:** Students who participated in four years of high school music classes had a dropout rate of less than 6 percent.

**Higher Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test scores:** A score of 3 or higher on FCAT reading tests was achieved by 96 percent of students who had four music credits or more, versus those who had none. A 3 or higher was scored on FCAT tests by 85.65 percent of students involved in music throughout high school.

**Higher SAT scores:** High school students scored higher in math and verbal than students who have no music credits. [ Source: [www.cfaefl.org](http://www.cfaefl.org) ]

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