

# Music: It gets the brain working, too

BY PEGGY HILL-BREUNIG — Waunakee Community School District Board of Education member

**M**aking music is not only enjoyable, the data and research say it's good for your children. From the very young to those getting ready for a new school year, all children benefit when provided opportunities to actively participate in music.

We know our children respond to music. We comfort and bond with babies when we hold and gently rock them while humming, singing a song or playing music. It is hard to keep toddlers still when they hear a John Philip Sousa march at an outdoor concert.

Daniel Levitin, author of "This is Your Brain on Music," explores the connection between music and the brain. Levitin argues music is fundamental to our species, even more so than language.

Listening to music coordinates more disparate parts of the brain than almost anything else (helping to explain why music can elicit physical and emotional responses) – and playing music uses even more.

As researchers continue to discover more about how the brain develops and functions, we also learn how introducing children to music early in their lives positively affects brain stimulation, growth and learning.

"A music-rich experience for children of singing, listening and moving is really bringing a very serious benefit to children as they progress into more formal learning," Mary Luehrsen, executive director of the National Association of Music Merchants (NAMM) Foundation, a not-for-profit association that promotes the benefits of making music, said.

Making music involves more than the voice or fingers playing an instrument; a child has to tap into multiple skill sets, often simultaneously. Children will use their ears and eyes, as well as large and small muscles,



Waunakee Tribune file photo

*The Waunakee Intermediate School's sixth-grade band practices. Research has shown playing an instrument helps children with academic learning.*

Kenneth Guilmartin, cofounder of Music Together, an early childhood music development program for infants to kindergarteners that involves parents or caregivers in the classes, said.

"Music learning supports all learning...it's a very integrating, stimulating pastime or activity," Guilmartin said. [From "The Benefits of Music Education;" article by Laura Lewis Brown at PBS Parents].

There are many things you can do to inspire your children's creativity by introducing them to music in meaningful ways at home. Look for helpful information, tips and ideas on the "PBS Parents" website at [www.pbs.org/parents/education/music-arts/music/](http://www.pbs.org/parents/education/music-arts/music/).

As the academic and lifelong benefits associated with active participation in music and the arts become more widely known, business leaders, educators, scientists and government agencies are increasingly recognizing that music and arts education is just

as important as math, science and reading in our schools.

"The outcomes associated with arts education – which include increased academic achievement, school engagement, and creative thinking – are becoming increasingly important. The opportunity to learn about the arts and to perform as artists is an essential part of a well-rounded curriculum and complete education." – President's Committee on the Arts and Humanities (2011).

For several years, many studies have been published that report on the benefits music provides to the brain and learning.

The November 2013 issue of "Education Week" reported on a study from the University of Southern California's Brain and Creativity Institute. The study found that "music training may increase the neural connections in regions of the brain associated with creativity, decision making and complex memory, and they may improve a student's ability to process conflicting infor-

mation from many senses at once.”

Based on those findings, researchers say music education can be used to foster brain plasticity and treat learning disabilities related to language and hearing.

Dr. Nina Kraus, a professor and neuroscientist at Northwestern University, Evanston, Ill., has found research that music education improves students’ memory, attention and communication skills and can even help close the “academic gap between rich and poor students.”

Additionally, Kraus has found that music education during childhood can help sharpen the brain’s response to sound into the adult years, even if, as adults, they no longer actively participate in music.

Music provides another means through which children with disabilities can express feelings and ideas even if they are non-verbal or unable to express themselves in other ways.

Ana Pinho, a neuroscientist at the Karolinska Institute in Stockholm, Sweden, has found that music education can be helpful at any age.

“Even after stroke and disease, starting musical training can still help you get more from your brain,” she said. “All of these findings show [musical training] can create a lot of plasticity that can produce effectiveness across the brain, in cognition and behavior.”

Timothy Schaid, executive director at the Wisconsin Center for Music Education in Waunakee, has said the power of music education isn’t just students performing but rather the work, learning and experiences that occur every day in the music classroom.

“The learning that takes place in music class is just as important as learning that takes place in math or English class,” Schaid said. “In music classes, students are collaborating, they are being creative – deep-level learning is taking place. Music class is one of the many important cogs at our schools.”

Other organizations like The Partnership for 21st Century Skills, a non-profit devoted to promoting and supporting 21st century readiness, have agreed that music and the arts are a crucial part of a child’s education. The organization lists the arts (which include music) among its list of core subject areas.

Schaid, who was a music educator and then high school principal before serving as executive director at the center, said there also is a positive academic effect from participating in music.

Schaid remembers, as a principal, noting that students who were involved in music had higher grade point averages. Some would argue that higher-achieving students tend to participate in music, however, Schaid would argue this isn’t necessarily the case.

In addition to offering positive benefits for students and schools, music class offers another opportunity for a student to find their niche

and passion. Just like athletics, drama, tech ed, fine arts or any other classes/opportunities offered at a school, Schaid said it’s another opportunity for students to find their place.

“I’ve seen music classes bring students to school that otherwise wouldn’t have come to school,” Schaid said.

Data and research aside, it’s important also to recognize the role of music and the arts in the human experience. Musical training helps develop aesthetic awareness and sensitivity and music makes school and community a more pleasant place to learn, work and live. Music enables stories and traditions to be passed down through generations and has the ability to reflect culture and history.

This universal language enables children (and adults) to express themselves as individuals, to celebrate what we have in common and the power to bridge cultural differences.

As the late Elliot Eisner stated in his “10 Lessons the Arts Teach:” “The arts celebrate multiple perspectives...there are many ways to see and interpret the world.”

To view all “10 Lessons ...” see <http://www.arteducators.org/advocacy/10-lessons-the-arts-teach>.

So, find some good music and share the experience by listening, singing or moving with your children. It’s good for everyone!

*EDITOR’S NOTE: Portions of this come from an article she co-wrote with Shelby Anderson, editor of “Wisconsin School News,” a publication of the Wisconsin Association of School Boards, for their Jan-Feb 2014 issue. [http://www.wasb.org/websites/wisconsin\\_school\\_news/File/2014jan\\_feb/music\\_ed\\_janfeb.pdf](http://www.wasb.org/websites/wisconsin_school_news/File/2014jan_feb/music_ed_janfeb.pdf)*



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