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# Increasing Access to School Music through Modern Band

**... Modern Band  
... welcomes  
more students  
into a new  
culture of  
school music**

## Introduction

While music plays a significant role in most cultural groups of the United States, previous research finds that secondary school music participation falls along racial and socioeconomic lines (Elpus & Abril, 2011). Many concert bands, orchestras and choirs promote repertoire and musical skills strongly associated with White European traditions and experience disproportionately low participation rates among students of color. The financial cost of participating in many of these ensembles may also be prohibitive for students of lower socioeconomic backgrounds, and the time required of these ensembles may preclude students who need to work after school.

Recently, organizations and school districts promoting popular music education found success with “Modern Band” programs in city school districts serving higher percentages of Black and Hispanic students and students of lower socioeconomic backgrounds. By performing music that is popular among student populations on instruments that are authentic to the style, these programs may appeal to a group more representative of the overall school-age population in the United States.

A program in upstate New York recently examined disparities in school music participation by race, socioeconomic status and musical preference (Clauhs, Cremata & Whitehead, 2016). An examination of enrollment data at that time revealed that a White student was significantly more likely to participate in school music than a Black student in the district. Students who received free and reduced lunch were also less likely to participate in school music than students who did not qualify for these services. In focus group sessions and individual interviews, students reported a disconnect between school music and student music as a contributing factor in their decision not to participate.

The research team and music faculty involved with this study considered ways to create new electives that might attract a greater diversity of students by race, ethnicity, and musical preference. The music faculty and high school administration supported the decision to add a “Modern Band” course to the school’s curriculum guide to serve this purpose. The Modern Band course was pilot tested in the 2015-2016 school year and then officially added as a course and implemented in the 2016-2017 school year.

The purpose of this current action-research project was to examine how the implementation of this elective affected the enrollment and diversity of the school music program. We were also interested in Modern Band students’ experiences with the school music program and identification of barriers to access. A student questionnaire, together with data collected from the school district registrar, was used to examine those questions.<sup>1</sup>

## Method

The school district's registrar office provided data on the enrollment of students registered for Modern Band at the high school level, as well as data for enrollment of existing ensembles (bands, orchestras, choirs) and overall high school enrollment. Data on racial composition and free/reduced lunch services were provided for each of these groups.

The research team also developed a survey for current Modern Band students, asking them about their experiences with existing ensembles in the school district and the new Modern Band course. The survey was administered through a Qualtrics survey link during the final days of the school year. Of the 35 students who registered for Modern Band during the 2016-2017 academic year, 29 voluntarily participated in the end-of-year survey. The six students who did not respond to the survey were not present in school on the day that the survey was administered to the Modern Band classes.

## Findings

Demographics of School Music - Table 1 summarizes data provided by the district's registrar office for the overall school population, as well as existing ensembles (bands, orchestras, choirs) and the Modern Band class. In addition to the total number of students in each group, we identified the percentage of students who did not identify as White, as well as the percentage of students who qualified for free or reduced lunch, one measure of socioeconomic status for schools and students.

**Table 1. 2016-2017 Demographic Profile**

	# of all students	non-White	Free/Reduced Lunch
Overall School Population	807	272 (34%)	494 (61%)
Existing Ensembles	145	31 (21%)	59 (41%)
Modern Band Classes	35	17 (49%)	26 (74%)
Existing Ensembles + Modern Band Classes*	172	43 (25%)	81 (47%)

\* 8 students participated in both Modern Band and Existing Ensembles.

Enrollment data provided by the district registrar demonstrates that Modern Band classes greatly diversified the demographic profile of school music groups both by race and socioeconomic status. While a White student was still more likely to participate in an existing performing ensemble (bands, orchestras, choirs), a student of color was nearly twice as likely to participate in Modern Band than a White student at the high school. While students of color represented 34 percent of the school, they represented 49 percent of the Modern Band class. Students who qualified for free/reduced lunch at the high school were also nearly twice as likely to participate in Modern Band classes than students who did not qualify for these services. Taken together, Modern Band and existing ensembles re-

sult in a school music program that is more representative of the overall school population, both in terms of race and socioeconomic status, than the existing ensembles alone.<sup>2</sup>

**Barriers to Access** - In our Modern Band survey we asked two questions that identified student's experiences with existing school music ensembles. One question asked students to identify any school music ensembles they currently participated in. Twenty of the 29 students (69 percent) selected "none," indicating they did not participate in any of the existing ensembles that year. Of these 20 students, eight students indicated that they had never participated in one of the bands, orchestras, or choirs, and listed the following reasons for why they were not interested in those groups (Table 2).

**Table 2. Responses from students who never participated in a school music ensemble**

Question: Why were you not interested in school music ensembles?

1. Skills in the musical category are not up to band standards, and lack of interest.
2. Did not want to play for a big audience.
3. Takes out of school time.
4. Did not feel comfortable being on stage.
5. Don't like talking to other kids I don't know.
6. Wasn't really into music.

Of the 20 students who were not participating in existing ensembles, 12 had participated in an ensemble and left the program. These students provided the following reasons for why they left the program (Table 3).

**Table 3. Responses from students who left a school music ensemble**

Question: Why did you leave the school music ensemble?

1. I got bored.
2. I wanted to start getting ready for college.
3. I didn't have any extra time.
4. Because I couldn't read the music fast enough to play.
5. Switched schools.
6. The song we are given to do doesn't make me enjoy music much and the notes make it more hard to understand.
7. Had a lot of school work.
8. I just felt like I couldn't sing as good as everyone else.
9. I didn't enjoy the music we sang in chorus.
10. Got kinda bored of it.
11. I was not entirely interested.
12. Took a break to pursue other electives for my freshman year.

<sup>1</sup> This research would not have been possible without the generous support of a 2016-2017 NYSSMA® Action Research Grant, the Little Kids Rock organization, and the Guitar Center Corporation. A special thank you to Bryan Powell for professional development and support throughout this initiative.

<sup>2</sup> The odds ratio of a student of color participating in Modern Band versus a White student was 1.86. The odds ratio of a student qualifying for free/reduced lunch versus a student who did not qualify for these services participating in Modern Band was 1.83.

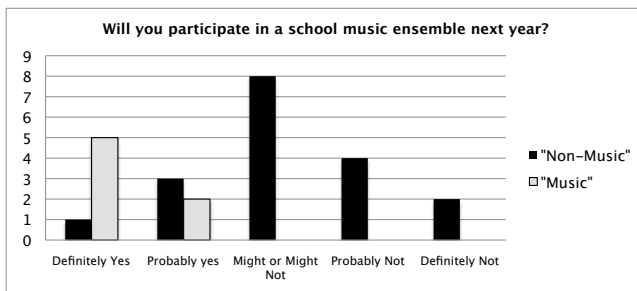
Time, interest, and lack of perceived ability seemed to be among the most popular reasons for not joining existing school music ensembles, or for leaving them. Many of these ensembles require after-school commitments and evening concerts. This requirement may be a barrier to access for students who must work after school. This barrier may disproportionately impact students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, as students work to help support their families.

The students who reported they did not “enjoy” the music performed by the existing ensembles may have not felt there were many opportunities for them to engage in music outside of a Western European art tradition. Other students felt as though they did not have the talent required to be in these existing ensembles. Since many high school ensembles depend on a prerequisite knowledge of music-reading skills and/or years of formal training on an instrument or voice, the gate for secondary school ensembles may be narrow for late beginners.

The current model of Modern Band in this high school addresses these factors influencing student participation. Modern Band classes required no outside class time, as there were no evening rehearsals or performances. The repertoire of a Modern Band ensemble is typically selected by – or more ideally composed by – the students themselves. Modern Band classes in this high school were also marketed for students “with no prior musical experience,” sending a clear indication that there were no prerequisite skills necessary for participation in these new ensembles.

**Impact on Traditional School Music Ensembles:** When students in grades 9 through 11 were asked if they would participate in an existing band, orchestra, or chorus the following year, 100 percent of the students who were already in these ensembles (for clarity, we will call them the “music” students) reported they would “definitely yes” or “probably yes” participate in these ensembles again. While most “non-music” students<sup>3</sup> were undecided, it is interesting to note that some of these students expressed an interest in joining, or re-joining, one of these ensembles the following year (Figure 1).

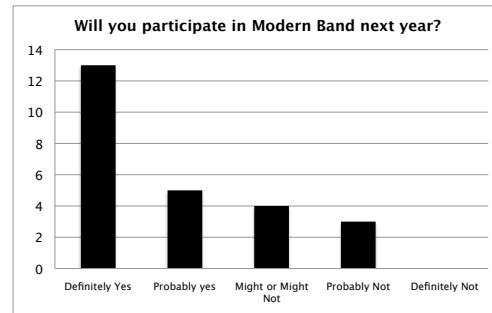
**Figure 1. “Music” and “Non-music” Student Interest in Participating in Band, Orchestra, and/or Chorus the Following Year.**



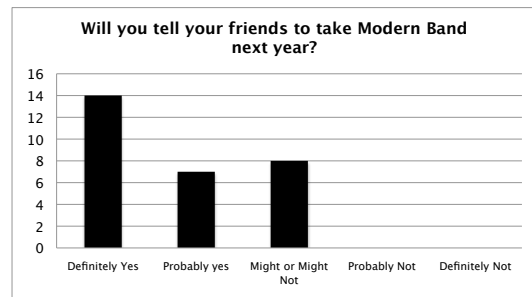
<sup>3</sup> All students should be considered “music students” whether they choose to participate in school music or not, and nobody should be labeled as “non-music.” These familiar labels are used only for clarity in the presentation of these findings.

**Re-enrollment in Modern Band:** Perhaps, the greatest measure of student interest in Modern Band is their commitment to enrolling in the elective again the following year. Students in grades 9-11 overwhelmingly reported that they were interested in taking Modern Band next year (Figure 2) and that they would recommend the class to their friends (Figure 3).

**Figure 2. Student Interest in Continuing with Modern Band.**



**Figure 3. Student Recommendation of Modern Band**



When asked why they would take Modern Band again next year, nine students reported a sense of enjoyment or fun when describing the class. Some students identified how Modern Band class helps to build confidence, “Modern Band is a really good learning experience and it helps you build more confidence if you have stage fright or something like that and its [sic] a good chance to meet new people.”

Another student noted how Modern Band class focused on the creative elements of music-making, writing simply “to like, create music.” When asked “why not” students answered 1) because I just needed it for the cred, 2) I’m not the greatest at playing instruments, and 3) I’m trying to take different electives each year.

## Discussion

Ensemble directors sometimes express a concern that Modern Band programs will weaken enrollment in other existing school music groups, as they imagine students leaving the band, orchestra, and/or chorus in favor of flashy new ensembles. The electives offered at this one high school demonstrated that Modern Band programs

might actually strengthen traditional school music ensemble numbers.

None of the music students in Modern Band classes reported they would be leaving the existing ensembles the following year. Sixty-nine percent of the Modern Band students at this school were not currently in the school music program, but some of these students reported an interest in joining at least one school ensemble the following year. While just three of the 29 Modern Band students were currently in Concert Band, eight reported that they might join Concert Band the next year.

While Modern Band offers valuable music-making experiences and has inherent value of its own, it may also introduce students to a variety of performing experiences, including those offered by other ensembles (e.g., band, orchestra, and chorus). This is not to suggest that Modern Band should be a gateway to “more important ensembles” but rather it welcomes more students into a new culture of school music, one that respects the values and traditions of a variety of musical styles and removes barriers to participation.

The quality of the existing ensemble program at this high school was in no way diminished by the increased opportunities for other (“non-music”) students through Modern Band. In fact, the existing ensembles attending the NYSSMA® Majors all received Gold Medal evaluations, performing in Level 4, 5 and 6 categories. The district was also recognized as a NAMM “Best Community for Music Education” in the same school year.

Of course, this elective was offered at the high school level. It is possible that offering Modern Band as an elective ensemble in elementary and/or junior high school may draw numbers from existing ensembles, as students in younger groups have invested fewer years of study. If this is a concern, music educators might find ways of incorporating Modern Band experiences in general music classes to all students. Many general music teachers have found success incorporating popular music pedagogy and Modern Band style classrooms, and this would provide all students with an opportunity to participate in both traditional and contemporary music settings.

Many Modern Band programs are especially well aligned with the four “artistic processes” that guide the new Core Arts Standards: Creating, Performing, Listening, and Responding to music. Even before the new standards were created, music teachers expressed difficulty in implementing creative music making activities in the classroom (Byo, 1999). The ultimate goal of many Modern Band programs is for students to be writing their own original music, not just recreating the music of others. The resources page at <http://littlekidsrock.org> provides worksheets on songwriting and improvisation and many opportunities to engage students in the creative process.

## Conclusion

In direct contrast to previous demographic profiles of secondary school music programs, this action-research project found that students of color and students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds were over-represented in our school's Modern Band classes, counteracting the trend of existing ensembles. When offered in conjunction with traditional band, orchestra, chorus programs, these Modern Band programs may help foster school music programs that are more representative of the racial and economic diversity of students across the United States.

Consistent with the longstanding slogan of the 1922 Music Educators National Conference, “Music for every child – every child for music,” (Karl Wilson Gehrkens papers), music educators should continue to explore ways to increase access to school music programs at every level. ||

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