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## **“It Really Comes Down to the Community”: A Case Study of a Rural School Music Program**

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## “It Really Comes Down to the Community”: A Case Study of a Rural School Music Program

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*Communities, schools, their music programs, and the individuals who participate in these groups are tied to the social, cultural, and political contexts in which they reside. Schools are often connected to their communities, and are often deeply cherished in rural communities. School music programs hold the potential to influence a small community’s identity. This article is a case study of one school music program in a rural setting that enjoys the support of the school administration, the school community, and its greater community. This study explores the perceived value of the rural school’s music program by members of its school community. Emerging themes included: (a) the presence of a music program tradition within the greater community, (b) the school district’s commitment to providing a comprehensive education to students, and (c) the music teacher’s interest in and openness to the community.*

Keywords: *music advocacy, rural schools, music education, community, place theory*

Communities, schools, their music programs, and the individuals who participate in these groups are tied to the social, cultural, and political contexts in which they reside. Drawing on the MayDay Group Action Ideal II, which seeks to “account for the fullest range of meanings inherent in individual and collective musical actions,”<sup>1</sup> I examine a thriving rural school music program through a place theory lens. Places are comprised of geographical space, and are associated with meaning and value as a result of the experiences, interactions, and perceptions that we as humans relate to them. Places develop meaning through experiences we associate with, and the relationship developed in, a particular setting (Callejo, Fain, and Slater 2004; Casey 1997; Cresswell 2004; Spring 2013; Stauffer 2012). As humans, we influence a place through our

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thoughts and actions. Similarly, we are shaped by the experiences and values that are a part of the places we encounter (Casey 2001).

Place-based education (PBE) describes the ways in which a school is connected to its community, as well as the interrelationships between school personnel, students, parents, and local residents (Gruenwald 2003; Stauffer 2012). Place-based education can help to develop strong ties between students, schools, and the community (Sobel 2005). Take, for example, a school music program. While learning may take place in the music classroom, a physical location within a school, the experiences and perceptions that individuals have and associate with that place contribute to a socially constructed meaning for the place (Kruse 2014). A school music program may have a place in the school building, and also within the greater community. Social, cultural, and historical meanings can help to create value and support of a school music program by members of its school and local community. This article is a case study of one school music program in a rural setting. This particular school music program enjoys the support of the school administration, the school community, and its greater community.

## **Literature Review**

### *Rural School Music Education*

There are many ways in which a place-based philosophy may be prominent in rural education settings. Small rural communities often have strong networks between the school and members of the community (Spring 2013). Community members develop a sense of interdependence, where community traditions and neighborhood connectedness are a part of life (Bates 2013; Spring 2013). Schools are often deeply cherished in rural communities (Bates 2013), and their music programs have an opportunity to help create identity for the greater community (Spring 2013). Rural music teachers can develop close personal relationships with students, parents, and community members that provide them with a sense of belonging, as well as validation and support from the community (Bates 2011). Rural school music teachers can develop a strong support system from parents and the community by making their programs visible in the community, and providing opportunities for student participation (Bates 2011; Hunt 2009; Spring 2013). Despite the strengths often found in rural education settings, music

teachers in rural school districts may face different challenges than their urban and suburban counterparts. Music teachers may be new to teaching, and find themselves isolated from urban areas and resources (Bates 2011; Spring 2013). Some music teachers treat their rural music teaching positions as entry-level jobs, thus preventing them from developing any long-term attachment or commitment to the school or community (Bates 2011). Such challenges can be considered in the larger dialogue about the value of music education, not only in rural settings, but also in public schools throughout the United States.

### *Value of School Music Education*

The value of music education in schools has persisted as a constant topic of conversation in the education profession, particularly in the face of school budget cuts. The era of accountability, with resulting changes to curriculum and resources, has forced schools and communities to consider the value of public schools and of school music programs in their communities (Elpus 2014). With little incentive for administrators to support content outside of the tested subject areas, course offerings and instructional time for untested subjects, such as music, often were reduced (Elpus 2014). Administrators, parents, and music teachers identified NCLB mandates, standardized testing, budgetary constraints, staffing deficiencies, facilities, and declining enrollment numbers as obstacles in providing and maintaining a school music program (Abril and Gault 2007, Abril and Gault 2008, Major 2013, Miksza 2013). Music teachers also identified a lack of administrative support, scheduling inflexibilities, socioeconomic factors (such as students' inability to pay for instruments), and a negative community attitude toward music programs as obstacles in maintaining a school music program (Abril and Gault 2008; Abril and Gault 2007; Major 2013; Miksza 2013).

Despite these obstacles, music programs remain in many schools throughout the United States. Music programs thrived in some school communities over others because the community valued and supported music's educational function, and sought to maintain resources for its sustainability (Major 2013; Schultz 2006). A number of researchers have examined the factors of perceived value and support of a music program within a school, and by the greater community. Factors contributing to thriving school music programs included parental and

community support, administrative support, faculty support, funding for the music program, an active and dedicated music teacher, strong relationships between the music teacher and community, and the number of students enrolled in school music programs (Abril and Bannerman 2014; Abril and Gault 2007; Coysh 2005; Major 2013; Miksza 2013). Major (2013) determined that a synergy of support between the music teacher, school administrators, parents, students, and the greater school community influenced the success of one school music program. The combination of these relationships, each fostered by the teacher, was most influential in the program's success. Abril and Bannerman (2014), Abril and Gault (2008), and Coysh (2005) noted that teachers and administrators determined that local factors were more influential than district, state, or federal policies, though Abril and Gault (2008) found significant differences between rural and suburban schools in their accessibility to, and resources for music programs.

Abril and Gault (2008) suggested that further understanding of the perceptions of members within a school community might help to determine indicators of school music program success and could help in acquiring support for music programs in other communities. Miksza (2013) suggested that a clearer definition of community support would help to identify factors that contributed to music program success. Abril and Bannerman (2014) indicated that a qualitative study in a specific school context might help to determine factors that contribute to maintaining and improving a music program. The literature has examined the importance of community in rural settings, and the impact of community support in valuing music programs in urban and suburban school settings. However, there is little pertaining specifically to the elements contributing to the perceived value of a school music program in a rural school setting. Understanding the perceptions of members of a supportive community might provide useful insight into their reasons for supporting their school music program.

### **Method and Purpose**

The purpose of this intrinsic case study (Stake, 1995) was to explore the perceived value of a rural school's music program by members of its school community, and to determine ways in which school and community members showed their sup-

port. Through a lens of place theory, research questions sought to examine the ways in which a school is connected to its community and shaped by its members. Research questions included the following:

1. How does the community (including students and parents) show that they value the school music program, and what are their reasons for this value?
2. How does the school administration show support toward the music program and what are the reasons for that level of support?
3. What does the music teacher perceive about how he is valued and supported? What steps does he take to develop value and support within the school?

### *Locus*

The Ellensburg<sup>2</sup> school district is located in a rural community in the Midwest. According to state census records, the community had a population of 1,066 in 2013. Ellensburg is located approximately 30 miles from a mid-sized city, whose population was 33,423 in 2013. State school demographic data determined that the district served 797 students in 2013–2014. In the district, 58.34% of those students were labeled economically disadvantaged. The school district was predominantly white (94.86%), and employed nine administrators and 51 teachers. Graduation requirements included two credits of creative, performing, or industrial arts. The personnel for the district's music program comprised of one elementary general music teacher and one secondary band and choir teacher. Over the last few decades, the teacher turnover rate resulted in a new secondary school music teacher every three to four years. At the time of this study, the secondary school music teacher had recently graduated from a local state university, was in his third year of teaching, and was enjoying great success and support in growing the school music program. I chose this school because despite its rural location, susceptibility to economic disadvantage, and teacher transience, the secondary school music program was thriving, and I wondered what this particular school and community were doing to make it so.

### *Participants*

The school music teacher identified individuals based on their varied roles in the school community as those who might provide the richest data for the study.

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Upon his recommendation, I chose the following participants through the use of intensity sampling (Patton 2002).

### *Administrators*

- Robert<sup>3</sup>: current superintendent, former teacher, coach, assistant principal, and curriculum coordinator for the district; his children attend Ellensburg schools, and participate in the school music program.
- Ross: current athletic director, basketball coach, and guidance counselor, and former teacher for the district; his older children have graduated from the district, and his daughter Hannah, a senior, is a student participant in this study.
- Mark: current high school principal and varsity football coach, and former teacher for the district; his children have graduated from the district.
- Tyler: current elementary school principal and former teacher for the district; his children attend Ellensburg schools, and one plays in the school band.

### *Teachers*

- Anita: junior high school teacher in the district for 15 years; her children and grandchildren attend or graduated from Ellensburg schools, and her daughter is also a teacher for the district.
- Leah: elementary teacher in the district for 6 years; she is a graduate of Ellensburg schools, her children attend Ellensburg schools, and her son is a member of the band.
- Alice: high school teacher and track coach in the district for 33 years; she is a graduate of Ellensburg schools, and was a member of the band during her high school years.
- Marvin: elementary music teacher in the district for 16 years; he was the former high school band director for the district.
- Noah Sanbar: junior high and high school band and choir teacher for 3 years; he is originally from a suburban community, and moved to Ellensburg upon accepting the music teaching position.

### *Parents*

- Lester: music booster president; he is a graduate of Ellensburg, and was a member of the band during his high school years, he met his wife in the school band program, his children graduated from Ellensburg schools, and were members of the school band.
- Monica: music booster member; she is a graduate of Ellensburg, her children attend Ellensburg schools, and are members of the band and choir. Her daughter, Lauren, a senior, is a student participant in the study.

### *Students*

- Jessica: freshman band member; she identifies as a band student, and is very active in curricular and extra-curricular band activities.
- Lauren: senior band and choir member who also identifies as an athlete; her mother is a parent participant in the study. Lauren and her family participate fully in arts programs in the school and greater community.
- Hannah: senior band and choir member who also identifies as an athlete, her father is an administrator participant in the study. Hannah's family is very supportive of her musical endeavors.

Many of the participants filled overlapping roles. For example, a number of administrators and teachers also were parents of students in the music program, and many administrators were former teachers in the school district.

### *Data Sources, Procedures, and Analysis*

I used multiple sources of information in data collection to provide deeper understanding of the school music program (Creswell 2013). In an effort to avoid potential biases, I collected data from a variety of sources within the school community: school administration, teachers, parents, and students. I conducted semi-structured, face-to-face interviews (Seidman 2013) with all adult participants and a focus group interview with the three student participants. I also collected data through the school district website and school and classroom observations. By using the same interview techniques and general questions with each participant, I maintained “consistency of different data sources within the



same method” (Patton 2002, 556). I transcribed each recorded interview and submitted copies of my transcriptions to each participant for member checks to ensure that I represented them accurately. I coded and triangulated data from each participant’s interview and looked for recurring themes and relationships among the data and categories (Denzin and Lincoln 1994, Saldaña 2009).

## **Findings**

Emerging themes included: (a), the presence of a music program tradition within the greater community, (b) the school district’s commitment to providing a comprehensive education to students, and (c) the music teacher’s interest in and openness to the community. A synergistic relationship existed among and between these themes, meaning each of these parts worked together to accomplish more than any single part could on its own. This synergism contributed to the support and value that the community placed on the school music program in Ellensburg.

### *Music Program Tradition within the Greater Community*

#### *Community History*

*Familial roots.* The Ellensburg community grounds itself in town, school and personal history. Most participants shared that they were either raised in Ellensburg or that they moved there early in their careers. Most were raising or had previously raised families in the community, and some had grandchildren in the school district now as well. “I went to school in Ellensburg, grew up in Ellensburg. I live close to where I grew up. My dream job was always to teach at Ellensburg,” Leah explained.

This longevity in the community helped participants to understand the history of their community and school district, as well as have a personal connection to many individuals with whom they worked. It also fully connected the community to the school district in a very intertwined relationship. Hannah, a senior at Ellensburg said, “I’ve been here my whole life. My dad works here in the school. He’s the guidance counselor and athletic director, so I’ve spent a lot of time here.” The community connection is important to school administrators as well. Robert,

the district superintendent noted that all of the building administrators live in the community and are connected to the families and students who attend Ellensburg schools.

*History of the school music program.* It was impossible to discuss the current music program with any of the participants without discussing its history. The Ellensburg school district historically has had a strong music program, and most individuals (participants and community members) were a part of the music program during their school years. Everyone spoke of the “Marching Strong,” referring to a time, forty years ago, when the band exceeded 100 students and proved a bigger draw at the football games than the football team. “The older community and the older alumni always talk about the ‘Marching Strong’, back when they had 100 or 120 people,” said Robert. “I think that foundation is still in the community—that idea and that mindset.” Noah, the music teacher reiterated this sentiment. “The marching band was big, all through the ‘70s and early ‘80s. There are lots of people in this community that really love this band and the program. It meant a lot to them,” Noah explained. The history of the marching band remains an important musical tradition in Ellensburg today. “You go six miles down the road to Powell and they don’t have that, so they don’t care. It’s not as big of a deal,” said Ross. The school’s musical history and community members’ fond memories of their experiences prompt them to want the same for today’s students.

*Teacher transience.* Despite the success of the “Marching Strong” era, the school’s music program experienced ebbs and flows in student participation and musical quality over the last forty years. Participants attributed this primarily to the turnover rate of the music teachers in the district. “We’re averaging about a three year stay since I’ve been here. That’s about what it is,” said Tyler, the elementary principal. As a result, program numbers have significantly declined. Participants often attributed this turnover to Ellensburg’s rural, isolated location. Tyler explained the struggle for many newcomers to the area:

If you’re not from here, this is a difficult place to settle in. I think if you’re not engaged or married, the pool is very small and there’s not a lot here to do. So it lends itself to people starting here and then moving on, which hurts your program.

Some former music teachers viewed Ellensburg's small school teaching position as temporary employment. Mark, the high school principal, shared some of the trouble with keeping new teachers in the area:

The others kind of viewed Ellensburg as a small school, like a stepping stone that they want to get to the bigger—where they have orchestra or symphony. They just want more numbers. Bigger is viewed as better, I guess.

Other participants cited one individual teacher's inability to connect with the community as a reason for leaving. "He didn't click with the community, the administration, the kids," Ross said of a former director. The music teacher's ability to connect and engage with students was important to community members in Ellensburg.

*Community Pride.* The people of the Ellensburg community remain proud of their school district and its musical history. "Music in this town is big," said Ross. The music program's recent resurgence prompted an increased interest from parents and community members. Participants proudly shared that over the last few years, the marching band has increased both in size and perceived quality of performance. "I think people are proud to see these things," Noah explained, "It really comes down to the community and if they support it, you're going to have the ability to do lots of great things." The community takes pride in the band and choir and in the positive image it reflects on the community. "It's something you can hang your hat on. Look at our band. They sound good. It's a pride thing," said Ross.

The community continues to have a number of opportunities to see the students involved in the music program. The choir visits local businesses and nursing homes for annual Christmas caroling. The marching band takes part in every community parade. Senior choir member Lauren explained:

The choir sings at the nursing home at Christmas time. We carol around town and people love that. They love it. They get so happy. I think that's a positive—we're getting known. We're not just in the school anymore. We're reaching out.

Superintendent Robert supported this belief:

The choir is out in the community. The band is out in the community. He's [Noah] in the community eye a lot, which I think in a small town... In any district, that's important, but especially in a small town. I think that's crucial.

At the start of his second year, Noah created an event where community members were able to participate in an Alumni Band. Noah explained:

The big project this year was the alumni band. We'd never done it before and I thought there could be potential to have a lot of people. They performed at half time and pre-game, marched in the homecoming parade. It was unbelievable. We ended up having, when you combine the current marching band members with all of the alumni, 106-108 people. It was huge.

This event brought a great sense of pride and a feeling of belonging to all in the community. Leah shared the importance of this event:

The people, the alumni of Ellensburg, were so excited to come back and do that. Noah made sure to get as many instruments as he could for them and even had majorettes. It was really cool. Those are the types of things, especially in a small town, that bring a whole different realm of people to something like that. It's really cool.

Momentum has been building recently and community members attend performances in greater numbers than in years past. Monica said:

You like to jump on a moving train and this is a moving train right now in our community... We're revisiting the glory years musically and it's exciting people and they want to be involved in it, so they want to come and participate.

The connection of alumni and current band members sparked increased community interest in the music program at the school. "There are people that are just community members that don't have kids here anymore that come back because of all the stuff that's going on," said Alice. Community members felt a renewed sense of pride in the school band that reminded them of their own experiences as high school band members.

### *School Commitment to Providing a Comprehensive Education to Students*

*Administrative and Faculty Support.* The school administration and faculty participated fully in the school community. Senior band and choir member Hannah said:

At our band concerts, we always have half our staff there supporting us and you come back to school the next day and they're always like, 'Oh, you did such a nice job. That one song was amazing!' Everyone's really supportive about it.

In making curricular and financial decisions, the school superintendent sought to provide opportunities for all types to students. Robert said:

You have to make sure ... that the opportunities exist first and foremost. If we cut the music program, there's no opportunities there... We have to make sure the experiences are there for the students, and then you support it by speaking highly of it.

Fellow administrator Mark shared this view:

There aren't that many opportunities in Ellensburg to be a part of something and so, if you can be part of the band or part of the drama club or whatever, then we need to do that so that our kids can have an identity with something. I see the value in that. It just provides more opportunities for our kids.

Teachers shared that a number of their students have few opportunities to travel. Music class trips, band camp, and other activities that students are a part of are opportunities that the school is committed to providing. The band and choir had a trip planned to a major city in the coming months. "There are so many kids excited and on the trip. I think, 'What would those kids do if we didn't have that?' I don't think there's a thing in Ellensburg that could replace that," said Leah. "There are a lot of kids in the community that would never, ever be able to go see the city," said Alice. Student opportunities are a priority for the school administration and faculty.

Building administrators sought to provide student opportunities as well by being cognizant of, and creative in solving, scheduling concerns. An example of this was in allowing students taking college classes to voluntarily be in band or choir. Ross, the guidance counselor explained:

There are conflicts at times and a kid has to decide, but that's where Mr. Sanbar's [Noah] flexibility has helped. Sometimes the kid doesn't have to be in band every day or maybe comes after school and is able to still perform.

Faculty at Ellensburg had a sharing philosophy. They worked together to provide as many opportunities as they could for students. Robert said:

We're going to work together. You come to our football game and you'll see three or four football players that peel off their shoulder pads and they play at half time. You have to have that give and take.

"The drum major is an all-conference defensive tackle. Half time starts, he whips off his uniform, and he gets on the ladder. It's real cool!" said Ross.

Administrators recognized the importance of this because their own children have been a part of the music program. “My family happens to like music even though we’re not musicians to speak of,” said Ross, “It’s always on in our home. We take a lot of pride in seeing our daughter in the choir.” Alice noted that: “They are very supportive, but I also think because a couple of them [administrators] have children that are involved in the program and they see what he’s [Noah] doing.”

Participants noted that the faculty at Ellensburg supported their students, and went out of their way to recognize them for their accomplishments. Noah said:

The support they’ve had for music has been unreal. When I sent out the Solo & Ensemble results, I heard a few of them saying to students in the hallways, ‘That’s awesome, what you did.’ They have been very, very supportive.

The shared responsibility of community, trust in faculty, and supportive environment created a positive environment at the school that allowed for growth in the music program for students.

*Financial Support.* Though much of the school’s commitment to music education was in the form of moral support, the district and community also reflected the importance of the music program through monetary means. The school administration consistently avoided cutting the music program during budget cut decisions, as they remained committed to providing as many opportunities for their students as they could. Mark said:

I have a passion for the program and giving opportunities for kids, so I push to keep the program because every year, small schools face budget cuts. That’s the reality of the situation. It just keeps coming and we’ve always fought to preserve the music program.

“It just always has been,” said Tyler, “Our school board prides itself on supporting music and sports. They will spend for both. That’s just how it is.”

Administrators and board members also made personal donations to the music program. Tyler shared the financial commitment individuals made to the program:

Our school board president gave his own personal money. They needed new uniforms and I think he gave something like \$25,000 with no interest. ‘Pay me back when you can.’ And our athletic director has given to the band. It’s like, wow!

Traditionally, school board members have donated a portion of their salary to the music program. Mark shared:

The school board—I think as far as I can remember all eleven years—have donated money to the music department. They don't get paid a lot to be school board members, but they've donated that money to purchase music and things of that nature.

The greatest financial expression of support was in the \$130,000 renovation of the music room that was completed with monies from the school district's sinking fund, acquired through a community-supported millage. "That's a commitment to your program," said Anita, "If nothing else, that's a commitment to your program." Similarly, Mark said, "I think our community certainly showed their support for the entire school, but then the administration put \$130,000 toward the band room project and put money into that program." The band room became the newest, nicest and most technologically advanced room in the school district.

### *Music Teacher Interest in and Openness to the Community*

*Humility.* Administrators, teachers, students, and parents regularly referred to the leadership qualities, as well as an interest in building relationships that Noah brought to his position at Ellensburg. When he first arrived, Noah sought to understand where the community was and look for ways to improve what was already happening. Noah said:

I wanted to get a sense of what they were doing before. Where does it line up with my philosophies and my ideas about music education? What opportunities are currently here? And from there, I started implementing things. Where can we really take this and see the potential and the growth? One thing I asked was, "What is the community? Where's the value of the program and how can I enhance that?" And I realized that the community really enjoys this and the students really enjoy this. Where am I in my community? Where am I going to have the most success and reach the most people?

This went a long way in winning over the community. As Lauren explained:

Who wants a new guy who acts like he knows the place better than people who've been here for 40 years? I think Mr. Sanbar did a great job of easing his way into it and showing that he's a go-getter and that he wants this little town of Ellensburg to thrive. He sees the potential in all of us and wants us to push ourselves as far as we can go.

Participants described Noah as being energetic, enthusiastic, positive, and inclusive, and viewed those qualities as essential to his work and the program. Noah spoke of his role in revitalizing the school music program:

When it comes down to it, it was recognizing that there are a lot of things that are here and were in place to be really special. I just had to tweak a couple of things and put organization in place. And lots of it really happened on its own.

Monica reiterated Noah's thought: "Noah is really organized. He has drive. He has commitment... He allowed the community to remember that they needed a band."

Noah's commitment to building relationships with students and the community helped him to be successful in revitalizing the energy around the school's music program.

*Building Relationships.* Noah also actively sought to build relationships with faculty and administration. He has personal friendships with many of them, which has helped to integrate him in the school community and garner personal support from colleagues. Tyler said:

With Noah, we have a personal friendship. I've helped him move and we've done a lot of things together, so I know that he's got kids in mind. We talk about my daughter and what she needs to do to get better, but there's no pressure there.

Noah has developed a positive working relationship with administrators by being flexible in scheduling, attendance, and other issues that the school and its students faced. Mark, the high school principal, explained:

In our area, the fact of the matter is, sometimes we have students that are in band and their parents may not have gas money to bring them in to school for a night or three nights in a row.

Noah was more flexible than previous teachers in accommodating these challenges. His flexibility and understanding went a long way in forming a relationship with administration and students.

Noah built relationships with individuals in the greater community as well. Participating in parades and community functions gave Noah presence in the community. His creation of an alumni band united the community and built a relationship between him and music alumni of all ages. "Building relationships has been key," said Noah, "I write lots of thank you cards. It's recognizing people



and appreciating the people that are there.” Noah’s personal connection to many in the community afforded him moral and financial support in growing the music program. People felt he was invested in them and in their community.

### **Conclusion and Implications**

Ellensburg Community Schools was a place in which, at the time of data collection, a number of factors worked together to create a supportive environment for a growing school music program. Not unlike other rural school music programs (Bates 2013, Spring 2013), the longstanding history and tradition of individuals and the music program in the community prompted community investment in the school music program, and inspired a strong sense of pride for residents of Ellensburg. This history and pride helped to sustain the music program throughout the persistent problem of music teacher transience that was present until Noah’s arrival, a common concern for those in rural school settings (Bates 2011). Noah’s leadership and commitment to building relationships also contributed to the program’s success and value in the community. Such leadership traits were present in teachers of other supported school music programs (Coysh 2005, Miksza 2013).

Ellensburg Community School’s administrative personnel were committed to providing as many opportunities as possible for their students. Administrative and faculty members’ support of Noah and his students reflected patterns of other schools that achieved similar success (Abril and Bannerman 2014, Coysh 2005, Major 2013, Miksza 2013). The financial support from various school and community members, and in the substantive investment in the new music classroom, also contributed to the value and success of the music program. This data is similar to findings by Abril and Bannerman (2014), Coysh (2005), and Major (2013).

The synergy of relationships between teacher, faculty, administrators, parents, students, and community was the greatest contributor to the strength, support and value of the music program in Ellensburg, as all parties were committed to providing opportunities for students. Multiple studies have concluded similar results, emphasizing the ability to build relationships, and a commitment and dedication to the music program as key attributes found in all involved

parties (Coysh 2005, Major 2013). Though previous studies point to music teacher leadership and interpersonal skills as essential elements for success, none have explicitly identified the music teacher's interest in learning and understanding the traditions and context of the school and its community in order to build upon and improve that which was already in place, as Noah did in Ellensburg.

Ellensburg is a community in which its members are strongly interconnected through their relationships with each other. The school district is connected to its community, and its history and traditions are shared by all. Members of the school and greater Ellensburg community associate pride and history with, and feel connected to the school's music program. The school's rich and deeply cherished music program tradition, combined with an administrative goal of providing and maintaining opportunities for students made it a fertile place for a music program to experience growth and resurgence. Noah was able to recognize and harness this potential to develop a valued and successful music program for the school and community to support. His leadership, interest in, and commitment to the people in the community aligned with the values and goals already in place in the school and community of Ellensburg.

Music education advocate Paul Lehman said in 1988, "The unvarnished truth is that if music is not taught, the reason is simply that it is not valued highly enough... The question is simply one of priorities" (100). The thriving music program at Ellensburg Community Schools reflects Lehman's statement today. Despite consistent school budget cuts, fluctuating music enrollment numbers, and transient music teacher personnel, Ellensburg Community Schools remained committed to providing school music to its students. With a long history of school music, and community pride, particularly in its band, the Ellensburg community valued school music as part of its culture and tradition. Noah's ability to harness the energy and commitment already in existence within the school and community helped to develop a resurgence and revitalization in the school music program.

Ellensburg's synergistic relationship between school, community, and music teacher might serve as a model for school and community leaders situated in communities with similar social, cultural, and political contexts. The collective group investment evident in the Ellensburg community might successfully be applied to similar school and community settings to build and grow a school music program. While the synergistic relationships were important in El-

lensburg's school music success, schools in similar contexts might examine their own community's history, and relationships with school faculty and community members to better understand the significance of each, and to determine the impact of place and context on the school music program within their own unique environment. This would provide useful information in understanding the dynamics involved in supporting a school music program within various school and community contexts.

### **About the Author**

Andrea VanDeusen is a PhD student in music education at Michigan State University. Previously, she taught secondary choral and general music in public, private, and international schools. VanDeusen received her bachelor's and master's degrees in music education from Western Michigan University. Her research interests include music teacher education, choral music education, sociocultural and political contexts of school music, and education policy.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.maydaygroup.org/about-us/action-for-change-in-music-education/> for a list of Action ideals.

<sup>2</sup> This pseudonym for the town is used throughout.

<sup>3</sup> Pseudonyms for all participants are used throughout.