

Play on



At one school in Greater Manchester, investing in music provision is not only raising standards across the curriculum – it’s transforming lives...



At the risk of stating (or rather, repeating) the obvious – no one really needs reminding that this is an exceptionally challenging time financially for schools. Pressures created by a reduction in funding and hikes in prices for services have put a squeeze on priorities like never before – and of course, there are always those targets to meet. Non-Ebacc subjects are often the first to slide down the list when the budget needs trimming, but Stretford High School in Trafford, Greater Manchester, has been marching to a rather different beat recently... and achieving remarkable successes as a result.

The positive effects of learning a musical instrument on children’s confidence, self-esteem, and development of such vital soft skills as patience and perseverance are well documented – and it is even claimed that time spent mastering the violin or getting to grips with the guitar can boost IQ by up to seven points. Musical development can certainly help with memory, and there is a definite crossover with both maths and literacy, too. Perhaps it’s not so strange then, that Stretford High has chosen to invest heavily in music provision – including offering scholarships to gifted students on pupil premium and using music as a pastoral practice to help learners cope with challenging issues in school or in their personal lives. In addition to encouraging them to achieve academically, the school is committed to providing young people with opportunities to discover their own talent and creativity, and a crucial part of this, insists the leadership team, is giving all students access to the benefits that a musical education can bring.

In order to address the issue of funding, Stretford High has taken a threefold approach: assertive use of the pupil premium; the promotion of excellent staff attendance to dramatically reduce supply teacher bills, then directing money saved into music provision; and not being afraid to negotiate better service level agreements by the judicious use of outsourcing in certain cases.

Every Year 7 student at Stretford High School gets free instrumental tuition as part of the curriculum, from instrumental teachers who are all professional performers themselves. This is not a weekly whole class music lesson (although pupils have those too); it is a paired tutorial during curriculum time. Thereafter, students on free school meals are given the opportunity to obtain scholarship awards so they can continue to learn. Other learners can subscribe to the school’s in-house instrument lesson service.

Many students are provided with instruments to rent or to use in school with 83 per cent of Year 7s taking advantage of this. External professionals supervise workshops leading up to events like the school’s very own summer music festival in the park, Stretfest, and a calendar of performances for all students in the community. Classical music is played in the



corridors between lessons, and facilities have been improved, too – there is a new ‘Music Zone’ with a recording studio, and a refurbished performing arts theatre.

It is clear that the school’s investment in music has developed a passion amongst students. The vast majority of year 7s have expressed an interest in continuing with their instrumental tuition as they move through the school. Most of these students also express an interest in taking music even further into higher education and beyond, with many aspiring to be music professionals or teachers. Talent has been uncovered that might not have been revealed without this kind of support; now a third of the school population gets regular instrumental tuition without paying a thing.

At the end of each year the school conducts a survey to make sure the level of investment in music provision is still worthwhile and effective. An overwhelming majority of students say they have developed confidence through learning an instrument. They also report seeing improvements in themselves in terms of listening, concentration and organisation. In addition, attendance of year 7 students and those receiving music tuition in Key Stage 4 has increased on average.



“Of course, our students appreciate their music tuition for the skills it gives them,” observes Christopher Woolham, deputy director of performing & expressive arts at the school. “More importantly though, for us as teachers, it gives them focus, drive and often a means of expressing feelings and troubles they have found difficult to cope with. The fact that we have made tough decisions in order to invest in our music provision symbolises that we are willing to give each student the time and energy they deserve. This is a key strategy in engaging young people and parents who may be hard to reach. Opportunities for developing young people’s creativity and independence are fundamental, when instilling the highest expectations required to reach the best academic outcomes.”

Case studies

1. Jai*

When he was offered free instrumental tuition, Jai chose to play the drums.

He admits his behaviour in year 7 was far from perfect, and can recall times when his anger was overwhelming. This changed soon after he was offered individual drum lessons.

He enjoys playing the drums because it offers him a way he can express himself. He says, “If I’m angry I can express it; if I’m upset I can express it... I can lose myself in it.” Playing the drums allows him to let all his feelings out and “start again”. Now, Jai can control his emotions more consistently, and when he feels overwhelmed by them, music gives him an acceptable and safe outlet.

Jai has been given a focus and drive: he is in the music practice room at every possible opportunity, because he feels that if he makes progress, he will eventually achieve what he wants.

He aspires to be a drummer or a music teacher like Miss Prest. He is inspired by her because he knows that she respects him. In his own words, “It means a lot to show someone enough respect to teach them something.”

2. Ciaran*

Ciaran, who also plays the drums, sees the music room as a haven, and a place he can escape to.

Ciaran has said he got up to things he shouldn’t have both inside and outside of school before he found music. Playing the drums has given him a means of escaping negative influences and confronting negative thoughts.

His attitude to authority has also changed. Ciaran feels that he can go to any of his music teachers about his problems without fear of being judged. He trusts them.

3. Simon*

Simon lives in care. Statistically, he is at great risk of underachievement. However, his music teacher spotted that he has talent. She left it up to him which instrument he would learn, and having tried all the instruments available through the school, he chose the guitar.

Within four months, Simon had developed such confidence, passion and skill for the guitar, that he committed himself to pursuing a career in music. His goal is to be a famous guitarist. This isn’t just a pipe dream: he is studying for grade 6 guitar in year 10, a remarkable achievement considering he has only been playing for two years.

His determination to achieve has spread beyond the music room to other subjects. He is studying for AS level maths in year 10. His English teacher has said his creative writing has acquired a lyrical, romantic quality. His understanding of literature also demonstrates how highly developed his sense of empathy is.

The biggest change seen in Simon is how respectful he has become. He credits this to his musical tuition. He says that now he has a focus in life, he wants to give respect back to the people who helped him to find it.

*All student names have been changed