



# Music on the Brain

by Katherine Damkohler

Is your child receiving a complete education?

Most of us could not imagine our lives without music—whether it be memories of a childhood performance or recognition of the life skills we learned through music. When taught well, music can serve as a catalyst to improve learning and development in all areas. And yet, for thousands of children in our schools today, there is no music education. Despite efforts during the previous decade to restore the arts programs that were removed in the 1970s, a 2003 New York City Council Committee on Education report found continued disparities in the quality and quantity of arts education today and described the City's per capita allocation for the arts as "woefully inadequate." This is where Education Through Music (ETM®) comes in.

At Education Through Music, people are combating the lack of music programs in schools by providing:

- Weekly, in-school music instruction to thousands of at-risk children.
- A curriculum that successfully integrates music with other academic subjects.
- Teaching artist training and professional development to teachers and principals, giving each school the best educators possible.

ETM's staff and teaching artists believe that music is an incredibly important part of a child's early learning experience, producing motivated students and cultivating a well-rounded education. Research has found that children exposed to music in the classroom show remarkable improvements in many school subjects, including math and reading.\*

As a nonprofit organization committed to quality music education as well as learning in all areas, ETM offers comprehensive and sequential music classes for all of the more than 8,000 at-risk children in 17 inner-city partner schools throughout New York City. Without ETM, these schools wouldn't have the resources to provide every student with music education. The organization has an idea that is old-fashioned, and yet radical at the same time: to give every child access to a complete education—music included.

Every child in an ETM partner school attends music instruction at least once a week throughout the school year. Teaching artists and music teachers follow ETM's comprehensive and sequential, skills-based curriculum, containing instructional guidelines that meet national and New York State standards. ETM regularly updates the curriculum and other resources, and children have the opportunity to perform in concerts at school and around the community.

In addition to teaching children artistic skills and knowledge, teaching artists and music instructors use music to support learning in all areas. There are multiple levels of integration including content and thematic integration. However, transferable cognitive skills offer the most powerful connections. By building skills such as classifying and sequencing, music classes can directly support student learning in other academic areas. ETM trains teaching artists and music instructors to collaborate with academic teachers to make connections between the arts and academics. When teachers simultaneously reinforce cognitive skills and content in multiple subject areas, children have the chance to see different approaches to the same skills and to gain a deeper understanding of course material.

## Challenges Along the Way

One of the most difficult hurdles to overcome with integrating music and arts education back into schools is convincing the larger school community that music education is vital for a well-rounded education. Parental and community support

is critical to student achievement and the long-term survival of arts programs, and ETM works to integrate itself into the community. ETM staff and artists speak at meetings comprised of parents, school leadership teams and similar organizations, and ETM encourages these stakeholders to participate in schools' development activities. Parents are invited to be a part of everything, from ETM Teachers Institutes to student performances, giving parents an opportunity for increased awareness and involvement.

These opportunities for community involvement have paid off and, in some cases, brought inspiring results. For example, at Mt. Carmel-Holy Rosary, an ETM partner school located in one of the poorest areas of New York, parents of violin students have begun scraping together money to purchase violins for their children so that kids may practice at home. Others have begun taking their kids to concerts and performances to build on what kids learn at school. This type of parental involvement is important for the success of both the organization and the students' academic achievement.

## Reaching Success

ETM's work has been received enthusiastically by principals, teachers, parents and students alike. As one principal wrote last year, "[ETM has]: electrified and enlivened school spirit, enhanced parental support/pride, enhanced other subject areas, enriched my pride in being principal of a school that has such a wonderful program."

Teachers exposed to ETM see their students as better equipped to engage in teamwork and have remarked on the improvement of the overall school environment. One teacher said, "We would be at such a loss without the ETM program. All our children enjoy it and... [the ETM teaching artist] does miracles with the children."

Parents are also impressed with their children's enhanced creativity and their improved ability to maintain focus. And most importantly, the students say they enjoy their music classes. According to one student, "I learned how much fun you can have in music."

ETM wants to serve as many children as possible. I always say that our goal is to put ourselves out of business by ensuring that every child, regardless of ability or socioeconomic standing, has access to a complete education—one that includes music. We are working to create a generation of children who are better thinkers, better learners and better prepared for life in an increasingly challenging world.

*Katherine Damkohler has served as ETM's executive director since 1995. A long-time educator of inner-city children, she is a former teacher and school principal. As a principal, Damkohler led ETM's first partner school from a school originally slated for closure to a U.S. Department of Education Blue Ribbon Award-winner. Damkohler holds an MA from Teachers College, Columbia University. She lives with her husband Walter in Pelham, New York.*

\*Results from multiple studies available in *Champions of Change: The Impact of the Arts on Learning*. Ed. Edward B. Fiske 1999. President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities and the Arts Education Partnership.