

A musical connection

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Lake Orion has a long, proud history of military service and veterans who treat each holiday and remembrance with great detail and appreciation.

So when they invite local participants, it is a meaningful experience.

For the Lake Orion High School students, it often begins as another stop to follow the music and move on.

Yet by the time they finish, the community impact connects in a deeper way.

“The (veterans) hear the beauty and support the students, but they have a deeper personal connection to it because of the experiences they had when they were younger,” Lake Orion High School choir director Matthew Smith said. “To see them get choked up and very appreciative and shaking every student’s hand and thanking them for being there, it really gives a strong sense of what it really means. You can tell them ‘til you’re blue in the face, but until they can experience that one-on-one it’s amazing.”

For as ingrained as Lake Orion Community Schools is within the physical aspect of the Orion community—from the students, to the buildings, to the buses—the direct connection to the non-school community often comes through the music program. Performances of all types and all levels (the band’s annual summer concert at Wildwood, the appearances by the choir to sing and even elementary students singing holiday songs at the local senior centers) resonate within all residents.

From the Developmental Kindergarten students bouncing around a elementary music room to the LOHS senior marching in their final performance routine at the state finals, music becomes a major part of the curriculum at each level, creating a base and experiences, often for a lifetime.

Elementary School

When students arrive at the LOCS elementary schools, the music mission is simple: to build a foundation of musicianship while making it fun.

“The goal of elementary music is to give students the opportunity to explore music through a variety of activities,” LOCS elementary music

teacher Beth Simms said. “It’s an exploratory experience. We do a lot of singing, instrument playing, movement, musical composition, and performance opportunities.

“We give students the ability to work as a team to create a musical ensemble that’s working toward the common goal of creating music.”

Students arrive at their first music class with a variety of different backgrounds. Some students have parents who have immersed them in toddler music classes, some have just overheard music playing in their homes and others have simply experienced it through osmosis.

But each arrival hits students in a different way and coming together gives Simms and the other four LOCS elementary music teachers a chance to mold their formative experiences.

“Most kids when they come in and when we’re moving around to a piece of music, are automatically moving with a steady beat,” she said. “They don’t know it’s a steady beat, yet so we give that a name and explore the concept further.”

As the students move through their first year and through the following



five, the curriculum grows with them, with the lessons building upon one another. As the students get older, the concepts being taught get more complex. Musicians do more advanced music making with instruments such as recorders, and ukuleles and singing longer pieces of music. There are several ways students share their learning including in class performances, videos, and smaller performance opportunities throughout the year at the building level.

“What’s great about the elementary music program is that we’re lucky to have these students for 6–7 years which enables us to create a strong relationship between teacher and student,” Simms said. “We don’t only get to support their musical growth, but we get to support their social-emotional growth and social needs as well.”

The teachers understand what those years mean to the students. The elementary grades are the only ones that require the music education. Once the students enter middle school, music becomes an elective for students. That ability to steer each class in a certain way is a major asset when they’re in front of the teacher. But, when COVID-19 hit and the students were home, the elementary music staff had to reimagine everything.

“I’m so proud to be a member of the elementary music team. Our goal was to keep a quality music program going, no matter the format,” she said. “It was start from scratch, we had to take all of our music curriculum and recreate it to fit an online platform. We were on Zoom for a good part of the year and the lag created some challenges for making music. Thankfully we work in district that provides the resources for us to do that. I know there’s other districts that are not as supportive of the arts as Lake Orion is. We were able to receive a new music curriculum Quaver Music that helped us in the transition.”

Middle School

As LOCS students move into middle school, the opportunities expand as well.

There are musical performances, there are choir opportunities and students venture into the area of individual musical instruments. It’s a significant step up in tone and responsibility entering sixth grade.

“The biggest thing in middle school is, the students are accountable for doing everything correctly,” Scripps Middle School band director Eric Crimmins said. “In elementary school, they try recorders and other instruments, they sing and they are exposed to musical concepts in various ways.

Middle school is a time to try new things, but because they’re playing in a group along with other people at the same time, accuracy is important. So, the students are more accountable for playing and singing correctly. That would include putting the fingers in the right spot at the right time, playing the right notes, holding the instrument correctly, doing all the things to produce the right sound, using the right part of the tongue, striking the percussion instruments correctly to get the right sound.”

Students who choose music in middle school are there because they are interested and want to learn, which creates an engaging experience for the teachers and other students. While sixth grade involves mostly introductory elements, seventh and eighth grade have complete bands at each middle school,

learning to harmonize and blend their sounds together into one homogeneous band sound. The students combine into a larger band, which performs at MSBOA District Band Festival and other events. There is also the opportunity for motivated students to excel individually by performing at Solo and Ensemble Festival. They perform before a judge who offers feedback and a rating, which could result in a medal. Students also have access to local Honors Bands and may audition for the All-State Band.



The middle school music teachers have created a program that has become the envy of many districts around. Consistency is key, having with the same teachers in each building for years. Another contributing factor is the trust instilled by LOCS administration to allow them to tailor the curriculum and programs to the middle level. The teachers’ strong knowledge of every instrument, a supportive community of parents and significant funding (when possible) combine to allow LOCS to provide equipment and opportunities which contribute to a highly successful program.

Synergy with the other levels is a valuable component as well. Each winter the band programs hold Symphonic Celebrations, where the eighth graders play with the high school band. A

university professor rehearses with them, refining their skills during the day and then they produce a joint performance at night. There's also a joint opportunity in early Fall where the eighth-grade students perform with the Lake Orion High School marching band at a football game. "That's a huge draw for them," Crimmins said. "Most of my students are going to play in the marching band now because of that one activity we did with them." The excitement of that evening was a rush, especially as they recalled the previous year, where being in and out of school hampered their musical development and ability to perform. But even then, as COVID-19 limited the personal interaction, the middle school teachers found a way. Oakview music teacher Alyssa Jeris created individual videos for the beginner students to learn their instruments at home. Crimmins helped incorporate a program called FlipGrid, so students could record their individual performance, submit it virtually, and receive individual video feedback from the music teachers. This also helped develop the teacher-student rapport that was missing from in-person instruction. This year, LOCS provided large tents in the fall which allowed the band students to learn and rehearse outdoors, where there was no mask requirement and COVID-19 was less impactful since the students can spread apart outside.

These are the reasons band directors statewide reach out to the LOCS staff for advice on how to bring their programs to grow and perform like the Dragons.

High School

The Lake Orion High School music programs are known far and wide for their success.

Consistently, the Dragon Marching Band places among the state's best at the Michigan Competing Band Association competition at Ford Field in Detroit and represents the district as a standard for others.

But what makes the high school band program shine is director Michael Steele's ability to create options for the students.

His mission? "Throughout the course of a year what I'd like to do is have the students learn and experience as many different skills as possible that would allow them to perform more music and more advanced music at a higher level," Steele said, "so they would get an advanced experience and learn to love performing."

As much as he loves his job and the unquestionable passion for a band program that essentially operates year-round, the focus remains on the students.

Though he has a pretty good sales pitch.

To the freshmen, he explains if they join marching band in the summer, it will ease their transition to LOHS. Instead of entering the school with a few friends, they'll start the school year with 150. Instead of looking for a group at lunch, they'll see welcoming faces at multiple tables. Instead of looking for their place in the array of school sports and activities, they'll be comfortable even before Freshman First Day.

The feeling of community is an essential part of the program and that has little to do with your ability to play.

There are so many options: A concert band program. The marching program. The winter program with winter color guard, winter percussion, and the musical pit orchestra.

Within the concert program are four different bands: campus band, concert band, symphonic band and wind ensemble.

"We have as many different types of experiences as we can fit in our schedule," Steele said.

His approach is because he knows all students are different. Some embrace the rush of performing in front of the football crowds, while some are shy. And while that may not be the best fit for those students, the butterflies he has seen emerge from those cocoons over





“What I like is the curriculum isn’t so specific that it limits our opportunities, but it’s just general enough and applicable in so many different angles,” Smith said. “Not only is it the literature that we’re teaching them every day, but the musicality skills of reading music, the music history, and the music theory skills, all things that tie into being literate in music. All the skills they’re learning are skills they’re able to use cross curricular — math, science, history, interpersonal skills, problem solving skills, communication. It covers all the bases. That doesn’t happen easily in other classes.”

The mobility of the choir—their instrument travels easily—allows them to connect with the community on a deeper level as shared earlier.

It’s the performance at a Martin Luther King Jr. celebration or the Detroit Tigers game or the school Homecoming pep rally. It’s the national anthem at the Lamp of Learning event and or one of the students performing at the LOCS staff’s return to work this fall.

It’s the opportunity to perform with the Detroit Symphony Orchestra for a run

of their holiday shows, learning from some of the world’s best musicians and creating experiences and memories for a lifetime.

“We have a very diverse student population come through our music program,” Smith said. “Just so much support that stems from early on that gives the kids all these opportunities. (Normally,) we get to travel, we get to bring in professionals, we get to work with the band programs and the middle schools. Having the support that we have is not something that’s very common and found in most (other school district) populations. When we’re able to do that in this district and do it so well, it shows the kids how much this means to the school and the district as well.”

The common thread through all of the music programs is the passion. From the staff and the students.

From one level to the next, the growth with music expands.

Many find an outlet, a home, a place within the schools for their expression.

Which is the goal, to learn and enjoy the experience.

four years are enough to reinforce his view that the time invested is important.

“I’ve seen amazing transformations over two, three and four years in the program,” Steele said. “As they become more self-confident and more aware of their worth to a team. They’re able to look at their mistakes as not a negative but an opportunity to get better.”

During the COVID period, Steele also faced a challenge. The delay with online lessons, lacking the essential component of real time, forced him to improvise. It was never as good as in person, but instead of trying to listen and fit into the group online, each student muted the group and played along with the music through their headphones.

They made progress and found a way to adapt.

For choir director Matthew Smith, the experiences are wide-ranging.



Check out the Winter offerings in the Winter issue of the Enrichment catalog, available online at lakeorionschools.org/departments/enrichment-services.