

## INTRO 07?? Instrumental music educ

Baltimore City Public Schools is piloting a teacher-sharing model to increase access to band and orchestra classes.

Right now, only five elementary schools in the district teach instrumental music. That means most kids miss out on the cognitive and emotional benefits.

WYPR's Bri Hatch has more.

### 36029 ST:

**[Nat sound]** *"We're not warmed up yet. So let's do one, two, here we go"*

It's the middle of early June testing and graduation prep at Abbottston Elementary School, but music teacher Ariel Wirsching is leading a group of her fifth grade violinists to give me a taste of what happens in the music classroom.

Wirsching built Abbottston's violin program from the ground up, starting in 2013 with a tiny room in the school's basement.

*0:08 "There was a very sad, battered conga in the corner, and that was basically it."*

Wirsching and Abbottston's then-principal Cathy Miles began slowly purchasing any instrument they could afford in the school budget or on their own dime.

*0:09 "I bought a lot of stuff randomly, you know, cheap little instruments from Target back in the day, anything and everything to put something in that room"*

And in 2023, Miles gave Wirsching over \$20,000 in federal pandemic funds to buy her violins and all the fixings.

Now, all Abbottston students start taking lessons in third grade. Jefferson, an Abbottston fifth grader, said learning to play the violin made him feel good at something.

*0:09 “I remember when I was six, I thought I was useless, but when I started playing this thing, I felt actually useful.”*

Wirsching says she worries about music opportunities for students like Jefferson once they leave her classroom.

Only 4% of Baltimore City elementary schools and 11% of middle schools offer instrumental music classes. That’s a problem school leaders are trying to fix.

Fine Arts Coordinator Chan’nel Williams has been pushing the district to start a teacher-sharing model for years.

*0:17 “We didn’t always have the funds to support instrumental music across the district. And so I put forward a question to our leadership that was something like, if we never have the money, if we never get another dime, does that mean that our students continue to go without?”*

This spring, district leaders approved a pilot with one shared band or orchestra teacher to serve two schools next year. Williams said having the district foot the bill helps solve equity issues.

Some schools can afford to start a music program on their own.

*0:09 “They have enough budget to hire the band teacher. They have enough budget to support the instruments.”*

But other neighborhood schools don’t have the extra cash. Williams said that a 2018 study of the city’s arts education scene found a 20% difference in access between Black and white students.

Rachel Braisure, chair of music education for the Peabody Institute, said that’s a nationwide problem – and shortages in music educators are only making it worse.

That’s why teacher-sharing models are a great way to start ramping up access, she said.

*0:15 "We would be screaming if the kids didn't get any recess or PE because it's unhealthy, and yet, kids are getting access to this great support for emotional and cognitive health only if their area of school can afford it."*

Williams said she's focused on making the teacher-sharing model sustainable beyond the pilot to spread those mental and emotional benefits district-wide.

Bri Hatch, WYPR News.

**Headline:** Will teacher-sharing bring instruments and music lessons to Baltimore City students?

**Deck:** Only five elementary schools offer band or orchestra classes. Starting next fall, the district will hire one instrumental music teacher to work between two schools in a pilot model.

**By Bri Hatch**

Baltimore City Public Schools has a music education problem.

Only [4% of the district's elementary schools](#) and 11% of its middle schools offer band or orchestra classes. That means most young students miss out on the cognitive and emotional benefits of learning to play an instrument – especially those in predominantly Black or low-income neighborhoods.

But city school leaders are trying to change that. Starting next fall, the district will pilot a teacher-sharing model for instrumental music education – hiring one teacher to split their time between two schools in need.

“We didn't always have the funds right to support instrumental music across the district,” said Chan'nel Williams, fine arts coordinator for Baltimore City schools. She's been pushing for the teacher-sharing pilot for years. If this round goes well, another shared teacher will be hired each year hereafter.

“I put forward a question to our leadership that was something like, ‘If we never have the money, if we never get another dime, does that mean that our students continue to go without?’” Williams told WYPR. “It can't mean that. It just means that, in my opinion, we have to look at things differently.”

Williams sent an application to be part of the teacher-sharing pilot to 10 school principals in April, based on student need and commitment to developing the program. But the two schools haven't been chosen yet.

Baltimore County schools have been using a teacher-sharing model for music education since the 1960s. Brian K. Schneckenburger, instrumental music specialist in county schools' Office of Performing Arts, said access to instrumental music lessons is “available at every school in the system, full stop.”

“This really represents a long term investment by our district in instrumental music education specifically,” Schneckenburger said. “And it's something that even when some difficult decisions have to be made around budgets, [district leaders] have done their best to try and hold that line.”

In May, the county district announced that it had been named among the “[best communities for music education](#)” nationwide by the [NAMM Foundation](#) for the 20th year in a row.

“It’s been a point of pride for BCPS for decades now,” Schneckenburger said. “In a lot of ways, it’s an early equity piece for the district to hold on to.”

In Baltimore City, a 2018 review of the arts education scene found a 20% difference in access to opportunities between **Black and white students**. Julia Di Bussolo, director of local school arts advocacy nonprofit Arts Every Day, said she submitted a grant application to the National Endowment for the Arts to run an updated study.

“We’ll see if it gets funded, because I talked about racial equity all over the place in the narrative, and that’s not something that [the federal government] is into right now,” she said.

Rachel Brashier is the chair of music education for the Peabody Institute at Johns Hopkins University. She said disparities in access to band and orchestra classes are common nationwide – especially because of teacher shortages.

“That is the main barrier for music education, it’s simply equity,” she said. “Our schools aren’t funded evenly. I love the programs out in Howard County, in Baltimore County; they’re wonderful. But they have large budgets.”

Brashier said using a teacher-sharing model is a “great way to start” ramping up access. But eventually, she said, music should be treated like a core academic subject.

“We would be screaming if the kids didn’t get any recess or P.E. because it’s unhealthy,” she said. “And yet, kids are getting access to this great support for emotional and cognitive health only if their area of school can afford it.”

### **‘I felt actually useful’: Inside a Baltimore City violin class**

Di Bussolo, director of Arts Every Day, said arts education in Baltimore City went through a major upgrade in 2018, with the passage of the [district’s first strategic plan](#). That established the city’s commitment to providing “comprehensive arts education” and ensuring “equitable access” to [five state-determined arts disciplines](#).

It also upended an old city schools policy that said every school only needed to have one part-time arts educator.

“It didn’t make a lot of sense because 200 students all the way to 2,000 students and more had only one warm body that’s supposedly teaching art,” Di Bussolo said.

Under the [new guidance](#), schools are recommended to hire one full-time arts teacher per 250 students. Since then, the number of art teachers in Baltimore City has grown from 115 to 158.

Di Bussolo said a consistent issue in Baltimore City is that all budgeting decisions happen at the school level – not the district level. So, until the strategic plan, some schools decided to largely ignore arts education, she said.

But some city schools have offered music education for years.

Ariel Wirsching started working as the music teacher at Abbottston Elementary School in North Baltimore in 2013. With her background as a trained violinist, she decided to build an orchestra program there from the ground up.

“I had a tiny little room downstairs, really cute,” Wirsching told WYPR. “There was a very sad, battered conga in the corner, and that was basically it.”

Slowly, she and then-principal Cathy Miles began purchasing any instrument they could afford – in the school budget or out of their own pockets.

“I bought a lot of stuff randomly, you know, cheap little instruments from Target back in the day,” Wirsching said. “Anything and everything to put something in that room.”

But in 2023, Miles gave Wirsching over \$20,000 in federal ESSER funds to purchase a full set of elementary-school-sized violins and all the fixings.

“It’s very different and kind of special when you have administrators who are familiar with music programs, or know the value that they can bring to a school,” Wirsching said. “And I think that once people see that, ‘Hey, some of these guys will come to school specifically because they really enjoy being a part of an arts program,’ suddenly, that really makes a big difference.”

Now, all Abbottston students start taking violin lessons in third grade. Jefferson, a fifth-grader at Abbottston, said learning to play the instrument made him feel good at something.

“I remember when I was six, I thought I was useless,” he told WYPR. “But when I started playing this thing” – he said, tapping his violin – “I felt actually useful.”

Keyren, another fifth-grade violinist, said more students should learn to play instruments “because they teach you a bunch of stuff, and you don’t have to be on technology all day ruining your eyesight.”

Brashier, the Peabody Institute music expert, said learning to play an instrument can be thought of almost like tutoring.

“There are health benefits to music: stress relief, depression relief,” she said. “It helps with pain. It helps your memory.”

Wirsching said she worries about the instrumental music opportunities her students have access to once they leave her classroom.

“I need to make sure that they get as many opportunities to experience as many different kinds of music and creative expression and composition as I can,” she said.