

Excerpts from  
*Developing an After-School Steel Drum Program in the United States Based on a Middle School Experience*, by William Anthony Hailey (1993).  
(This was Dr. Hailey's doctoral dissertation at West Virginia University).

Steel drum programs represent one of the fastest growing multi-cultural art forms within United States public school music programs. Music educators are realizing the many benefits of providing steel band programs as a part of their music instruction. Public school steel band directors commonly have little to no steel drum experience, and traditionally develop their programs by trial and error. The author identifies and addresses fundamental requirements necessary in developing a successful after-school steel drum program including the capital needs, instrumentation, storage and transport, staffing, repertoire, rehearsing, student selection and performance concerns. This project has been undertaken in hopes of creating a document that will function both as a guide for music educators endeavoring to start steel band programs and as a catalyst for action and discussion in the area of developing steel bands in United States public school systems.

Recent government census data have shown that minority populations in the United States are increasing which in turn is causing music educators to rethink their curricula and pedagogies. In efforts to remain ahead of these demographic shifts, educators have become interested in world music programs. After-school steel drum programs represent one of the fastest growing types of multi-cultural art programs being incorporated into public school music curriculums in the United States. Public school music teachers and administrators are convincing school boards and administrators as well as the general public of the many values of providing these programs to students.

In defense of a grant proposal for support of a steel band program, the music coordinator of Chesapeake Public Schools, VA said in an interview with this author that she "stressed the importance of world music in any full-bodied music curriculum." As students of diverse backgrounds fill classrooms, many music teachers feel that it is imperative for children to learn about world music because it presents an excellent vehicle for extending the cultural exchange between students and gives them insight into the origins of values held by different segments of our society. The Fine Arts Coordinator of Hampton City Schools in Virginia stated that "the population is no longer content to be served only by band, chorus, or orchestra. Steel drums... are among the many offerings that are common in large schools across this country. Without this variety of choices, I doubt that Music Education will remain viable in many parts of the U.S."

One benefit of particular concern to music educators is an increased level of musicianship in traditional ensembles among students who participate in steel bands. Incorporating a steel band program into any music curriculum "augments many of the principles needed in performing with orchestras, bands, jazz combos, big bands and percussion ensembles." The unique experience of performing in a

steel band also stimulates multiple processes of learning by combining aural pitch recognition, visual elements of pattern identification and kinesthetic memory through movement. Therefore students are provided with a broader approach to understanding musical interpretation and are capable to better internalize the music, which can result in a well rounded musical education experience. In addition, ensemble communication skills are strengthened through increased interaction between students as they learn to interpret the groove in the same manner. Improvisation also occupies a major role in many beginning steel bands. For practical and artistic reasons, due to the brevity combined with melodic and harmonic simplicity of many beginning steel band arrangements, steel band directors allow students to take solos during selections. These solos serve the dual purposes of adding contrast and length to the song, while introducing the practical skill of creative performance to young musicians.

The steel band repertoire offers other creative opportunities that are unavailable in traditional Western music ensembles. The majority of steel bands perform, without conductors, music consisting of popular non-Western styles intended for dance or movement. Accordingly, one of the most generally observed benefits is the manner in which students readily identify with art form as apparent through their physical movement during performance. J.H. Kwabena Nketia states that “motor response intensifies one’s enjoyment of music through the feelings of increased involvement and the propulsion that articulating the beat by physical movement generates.”

Thus, the performing popular music without conductors may allow students to gain a greater sense of independence and ownership within the program, in turn creating a healthy atmosphere in which inhibitions may be lowered, leadership qualities are cultivated and strong relationships are often formed. Feagans’ and Bartsch’s assertion that “being a member of a close-knit youth group may help in making the bridge from childhood to adolescence an easier one to transverse.” is suggestive of the important role that a steel bands may play in students’ lives.

Another benefit is more positive views students have of themselves, including esteem, determination, and worth. Steel bands can “develop self-pride, performing techniques, body movement, motor skills, an increase in awareness of rhythm, harmony and melody and an atmosphere to promote working together as an ensemble.”

After-school steel band programs are often incentives, that when properly-structured can deter students from self-destructive behaviors by providing positive energetic outlets, involving music and movement as forms of expression, within an environment that is highly conducive of individual and cooperative achievement. The rewards of participating in steel band can far outweigh the risk of incurring any sort of disciplinary action which may result in expulsion from the ensemble. Thus these rewards provide leverage by which teachers [and/or parents] may demand higher academic expectations from students involved.

Performance opportunities outside of the scope of regular school music concerts are beneficial to musical growth and professional performance etiquette. Steel bands are frequently invited to perform at community festivals and other family oriented events. This increased exposure to varying venues and audience types allows students to gain an appreciation for and understanding of how music functions in different settings. Moreover these performances can be a means of generating revenue through performance fees or honorariums.