



Dorseyville Middle School Choral Director Amy Beresik instructs students both in her classroom and those attending virtually as they rehearse a song.



A Kerr Elementary third-grader plays a glockenspiel during a general music class.

ARTS & MUSIC PROGRAMS FIND NEW CREATIVITY DURING PANDEMIC, CONTINUE TO THRIVE

For at least a year, COVID-19 has redefined the traditional school day and prompted educators to reimagine classroom instruction. Perhaps no courses were as deeply affected by the pandemic in the Fox Chapel Area School District as its art and music classes.

The district's art and music teachers, certainly no strangers to being creative, had to find even more innovative and engaging ways to present their lessons despite a number of unprecedented obstacles, such as instructing students both in the classroom and those participating virtually, and restrictions on the use of classroom manipulatives and other materials due to cross-contamination concerns.

"When planning each lesson and project, we have had to totally rethink how we are used to doing things in art class," says Kerr Elementary School art teacher Becky Meyers. "I love to give students as much choice as possible to encourage creativity, but it's been hard to give as many options with having to quarantine some of the supplies to keep students safe."

With limits on the materials that can be used, Ms. Meyers says she shifted her art classes this year from primarily project-based work to include more lessons about art history.

Similar instruction is happening in music classes facing some of the same restrictions on the use of classroom materials and instruments.

"Until more recently, we have had to hold off on singing and playing band instruments due to aerosolization and potentially spreading COVID-19," says teacher Mairi Cooper, director of the Fox Chapel Area High School orchestra. "That's given us more time to focus on music theory."

While elementary students are able to play some instruments in class, such as drums, xylophones, and string instruments,

the use of wind instruments has been restricted, says Christy Ehman, music teacher at Kerr Elementary School. That also extends to one of the rites of childhood passage.

"Unfortunately, we are not playing the recorders in grades three through five in the music classroom," Ms. Ehman says, noting that students are practicing with them at home through assignments posted on their Google Classrooms.

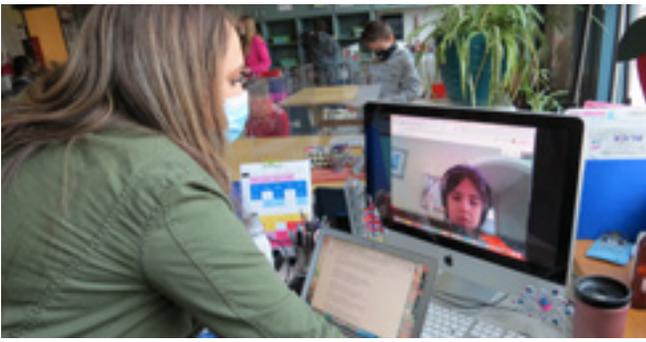
In addition to finding new approaches for their lessons, teachers also must navigate the complexities of instructing children in the classrooms along with those joining from home.

"Initially, this was such a challenge and fatiguing in a way I did not expect," says Dorseyville Middle School Choral Director Amy Beresik. "Along the way, I found that if I focused on the students by greeting them, telling them I was happy to see them, overlooked dark screens or lack of energy, and just continued to be positive, it became easier. When I received a Christmas card from a student who said, 'Thank you for always making me feel like a part of the class, even though I'm on Zoom,' it made me feel grateful that those efforts are paying off, even when virtual instruction feels clumsy or imperfect in the moment."

Equity also is a concern for those teaching students in varying instructional models.

"I want students at home to have the same opportunities as students here in my classroom," Ms. Meyers says. "That means that I have been sending home clay, tools, paint, and all kinds of things that are often overlooked when planning a lesson. For a class that requires so many materials to differentiate instruction and encourage variety, it's been a very big challenge."

In some classes, the dynamic of "some here and some at home" means a whole new way of teaching.



Fairview Elementary School art teacher Sarah Dixon works with a virtual fifth-grade student.



Fox Chapel Area High School Orchestra Director Mairi Cooper directs string students both in person and online.



Dorseyville Middle School art teacher Nanci Goldberg helps a student pack up her individual art supplies. In an effort to reduce cross-contamination, art and music students often work with supplies only available to them.



O'Hara Elementary School instrumental music teacher Evan Hertrich teaches students socially distanced in the school commons area.

“Because we can’t have in-person concerts, and by and large, students are not truly rehearsing together, we have had to completely restructure our curriculum and outcomes,” Ms. Cooper says. “In some ways, this has been good. We have learned a lot of new technology and are more aware of the abilities of many of our students because we are hearing them more individually than as an ensemble.

“In other ways, though, it has been heartbreaking. Our students thrive on creating music together. They seek those moments when they look across an ensemble and communicate through music with a friend.”

The art and music educators, however, laud the dedication and resilience of students, and how they’ve embraced learning and performing in new ways. At the high school level, the orchestra produced videos in smaller chamber groups to share with retirement and nursing homes, and the chorus students created a virtual choir.

“Our students have been amazing,” Ms. Cooper says. “Our seniors, in particular, have lost a lot but are always game to try a new effort. They have supported each other, the faculty, and the broader music community throughout this.”

“The students have been remarkably resilient, but I have found that we need to be aware that students can be struggling even when it seems they are ‘OK,’ and continue to offer support where we can so they can finish this year strong. I’m so proud of them,” Ms. Beresik adds. “I am most looking forward to having the students all together again so they can hear each others’ voices and enjoy the satisfaction that comes from working as a team to produce something beautiful. That is something I will never take for granted again.”

STUDENTS WIN AWARDS IN ART & MUSIC

Despite difficult circumstances, Fox Chapel Area High School students continue to excel and were selected for prestigious honors.

- Senior Joey Wang was chosen for the National Association for Music Education (NAfME) 2020 All-National Honor Ensembles Concert Band. Joey, a clarinet player, joined 120 band students from across the U.S. and military base schools overseas in a virtual event January 7 and 8.
- Three seniors were chosen to perform with the 2021 NAfME All-Eastern Honors Ensembles. Nathaniel Hines was selected for the Mixed Chorus, Jack Penland was chosen to play with the Orchestra, and Joey Wang was named to the Symphonic Band. A total of 719 high school students from 11 states were selected for the ensembles.
- Twenty high school and middle school students won awards in the regional competition of the Scholastic Art Awards. Seniors Jessica Jing McCann, Joey Wang, Alwyn Williams, and Wenyu Zuo; sophomore Jonathan Li; and freshman Isabella White qualified to have their work judged nationally. Additionally, Jing was selected as an American Visions nominee for her jewelry. American Visions pieces are considered to be among the very best of the show.