

# THE TENNESSEAN

## EDUCATION

# Can music education boost grades, attendance? A new case study suggests it might



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A new case study that included hundreds of Tennessee public schools suggests that music education may be tied to better math and reading scores, along with better attendance and positive social, emotional and behavioral effects.

The study, titled "Face the Music: A Case Study for Expanding Music and Arts in Schools," was the result of a joint effort between the CMA Foundation and the Mr. Holland's Opus Foundation. It examined the challenges and benefits stemming from music and arts education across 589 schools and 23 districts in Tennessee, and also included feedback from music and arts teachers, students and lifelong learners.

"Music and arts education are playing a key role in helping students catch up after the pandemic, from helping with math and reading proficiency to coping with stress and trauma. The research is clear: arts and music classes are a must-have, not a nice-to-have," CMA Foundation Executive Director Tiffany Kerns said in a news release.

The foundations behind the study hope it will serve as a model for other states to boost music and arts education at the state and district level, along with gaining support from nonprofit organizations and philanthropy.

Here are key takeaways from the study.

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## A connection between music, arts, math and reading

Data from the majority of districts in the study showed that students enrolled in music and arts programs demonstrated significantly higher proficiency rates in math and literacy. The majority of districts also saw better attendance rates from music and arts students, compared to schoolwide averages. These outcomes align with a handful of other studies. However, the case study report did note an important caveat: Most studies on music and arts participation don't prove it's the cause of improved academics.

Here's a look at the proficiency and attendance numbers the study revealed:

Roughly 1-in-4 school districts reported 47% of students enrolled in music and arts programs showed reading proficiency, compared to an overall school average of 36%. Roughly 7-in-10 school districts reported 46% of students enrolled in music and arts programs excelled in math, compared to an overall school average of 35%.

Roughly 3-in-4 districts reported increased attendance rates for students enrolled in music and arts programs. The study noted that schools where music and arts students outpaced the school average for attendance saw an average attendance boost of 12%.

## Systemic barriers to music and arts education

The case study also outlined factors that hamper access to music and arts education for students and schools. They largely align with trends reported in the most recent National Arts Education Status Report and historical data from the Tennessee Arts Education Data Project, the study said.

The barriers for students identified in the study are:

Participation requirements, including after-school attendance and prerequisites or auditions

Housing insecurity

Transportation challenges

Participation fees

Equipment costs

The study also showed that curriculum scheduling is a primary issue facing schools. That can disrupt the ability to offer sequential music and arts classes in every grade, allowing students to explore a variety of options and build upon their skills each year.

## Recommendations for action

The study mapped out a series of recommendations for how everyone from parents and students to educators and lawmakers can take action to bolster music and arts education in Tennessee.

For school community members like parents, students and educators, that can range from simply attending music and arts events to show support to advocating for more funding for programs. The study also calls on school and state leaders to partner to fund music and arts education, train teachers and develop partnerships that help sustain those programs in schools. It also challenges philanthropic organizations to fund grants, promote advocacy and awareness and take other steps to partner with and support schools.

"Each of us can support a system of change to enhance music and arts education for a more well-rounded education for our students," the study stated.

## A look at the demographics and schools

The demographics of the schools that participated were similar to the state of Tennessee as a whole, but they differed slightly when it came to the population of public school students statewide. Students in the study were:

- 73% white
- 16% Black or African American
- 9% Hispanic or Latino
- 2% other racial identities
- 24% socioeconomically disadvantaged
- 13% engaged in special education services
- 9% English language learners
- 2% experiencing homelessness or in foster care
- 1% identified as migrants or refugees

According to 2022-23 academic year data from the Tennessee Department of Education, here's how Tennessee schools demographics broke down:

- 59% white
- 24% Black and African American
- 14% Hispanic

3% other racial identities  
30% economically disadvantaged  
14% students with disabilities  
8% English learners  
Less than 1% in foster care  
2% experiencing homelessness  
Less than 1% identified as migrants

Here's the full list of districts that participated in the case study:

Arlington Community Schools  
Bartlett City Schools  
Benton County Schools  
Chester County School District  
Clarksville-Montgomery County School System  
Coffee County School District  
Germantown Municipal School District  
Giles County School System  
Greene County Schools  
Hamilton County Schools  
Jackson-Madison County School District  
Knox County Schools  
Lincoln County Schools  
Marion County Schools  
Maury County Public Schools  
Metro Nashville Public Schools  
Paris Special School District  
Robertson County Schools  
Rutherford County Schools  
Tulahoma City Schools  
Weakley County Schools  
Williamson County School  
Wilson County Schools

## Learn more

The CMA Foundation is the philanthropic arm of the Country Music Association. More information, along with the foundation's extensive research and initiatives, can be found at [cmafoundation.org](https://cmafoundation.org). Learn more about the Mr. Holland's Opus Foundation at [mhopus.org](https://mhopus.org).