

The Wise Village Music Program in Stanton, Kentucky: A Case Study of the Village That Sustained It

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The challenge of retaining music in America's schools is an ongoing concern for music educators in the 21st century. Even in schools with a strong musical tradition, teachers have difficulty developing programs that not only succeed but also endure. This case study identified leadership, organization, and community factors that contributed to the sustainability of an innovative after-school music program - The Wise Village Pickers of Stanton, Kentucky.

Sixteen interviews were conducted during a nineteen-month period with adults who were closely associated with the Wise Village throughout its history. The stories they told not only identified challenges to the program but also illustrated how and why it was sustained. Additional information was gained from onsite visits and examination of video and audiotapes and printed publications. Theories of social capital (Putnam and Feldstein, 2003), diffusion of innovation (Rogers and Shoemaker, 1971), new science of leadership and organizations (Wheatley, 1999), and sustainability (Hargreaves and Fink, 2003) served as lenses for examination of study results.

The Wise Village Pickers, founded in 1993, took its name from "Wise Village," a phrase that had been in use at Stanton Elementary for several years. "Wise," the surname of the great fiddler Chubby Wise, was a reminder of the bluegrass music that the group performed; "Village" referred to the adage "It takes a village to raise a child." The group was established as Stanton Elementary School's response to community concern about losing traditional Appalachian music and culture. In the process, the program overcame lethargic parental and community involvement at the school.

Children, ages 5 through 13, rehearsed after school an average of once per week with instruction provided by school staff members and community volunteers. At its peak, approximately 70 students participated in this innovative program. Parents stated that children always looked forward to making music and never complained about the time involved. Today the Wise Village continues to perform traditional Appalachian and bluegrass music. Students sing and accompany themselves on traditional instruments such as guitar, banjo, mandolin, fiddle, and upright bass.

Findings of this study revealed that several factors influenced the sustainability of the Wise Village. The program was highly compatible with community needs and resources. Interest in bluegrass music was wide spread throughout the area, as was concern about loss of Appalachian culture. Recognition of this interest by school officials sparked the establishment of the after-school program, the staying power of which reflected the depth of the community's interest and involvement.

The principal who founded the Wise Village was a dynamic leader who grounded the program in theory. This individual's vision exemplifies the importance of theoretical knowledge for educational leaders and its role in establishing sustainable programs. For

example, Robert Putnam's writings on social capital and principles espoused by Dewey were cited in interviews. Influences of each are evident in the Wise Village program.

Supportive social networks existed on two levels; each served as a "village" of its own. The first level was comprised of a group of intellectuals who engaged in discourse and debate. This group included musicians, public school educators, a retired government official, and a university musicologist. Members provided visionary leadership to establish and guide the program and also pursued funding to purchase and maintain instruments and to support trips and performances. The second level was composed of dedicated individuals who shared the program's vision, handled the day-to-day operations of the program, and worked with children in face-to-face instruction. A number of faculty and staff at Stanton Elementary have been involved at this level, as have musicians from the local community.

This study sheds light on several areas worthy of consideration by music teachers and teachers of teachers. A curriculum that incorporates music inherent in any local community can not only educate and inspire students but also increase support for the school music program while bridging the gap between the musical worlds of the student's classroom and that of their community. At Stanton Elementary, the Wise Village program took hold when the over-riding theme of preserving Appalachian music and culture was applied to a music curriculum already based on the nine national music education content standards.

While Wise Village originated with one individual's vision and commitment, much of the program's success and longevity was due to the commitment of teachers, staff, and community. This gathering of community members and intellectuals in support of an elementary music program is too seldom seen as, in actuality, the very nature of a music teacher's work is frequently isolating. Surely music programs with many champions have a greater likelihood of survival than those with one.

References

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