

Parents Express

Settlement Music School - Bringing the arts to your local community

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By Missy Smith

Amid dismal headlines about the state of our tumbling economy and the decline of our environment, it is easy to forget about other “less dire” matters. Even though it may not be priority No. 1 one right now, the diminishing arts and music offerings in our school system is still a very real concern. As parents, we are invested in our children’s education just as much as those issues that currently dominate the headlines. And arts education has proven to be as effective a part of a child’s growth as reading, writing and arithmetic, even if it has taken a back seat in recent years.

The good news, however, is that while the new administration is working on our economy and environment, it also has created a plan to save arts education, whether it be in schools or our communities. President Obama and Vice President Biden got a head start during the campaign and crafted a platform to support the arts. Their goal is to expand public and private partnerships between schools and arts organizations, champion the importance of arts education, and to form the so-called “Artist Corps,” see as similar to the Peace Corps.

In the meantime, during the last 15 years, when government funding for the National Endowment for the Arts was cut annually, schools like Settlement Music School were continuing to provide classes to those interested in pursuing the arts. With six locations in South, West and Northeast Philadelphia, Germantown, Jenkintown, and Camden, N.J., and more than 15,000 students each year, it is the largest community school of the arts in the United States.

“Settlement Music School is a community school of the arts – a place where everyone can find programs and activities in music and the related arts that will help them achieve their greatest potential and find the best of themselves, the best of their neighbors and the best that the world can offer in terms of creative expression,” says Kristine S. Parsons, director of communications.

The school’s mission is to provide children and adults in the greater Philadelphia region with high quality, individual and group instruction and activities in music, dance and the related arts, Parsons explains. Settlement also serves a wide range of students, regardless of age, skill, gender, race, national origin, physical disability or ability to pay.

“Settlement does not turn anyone away,” says Parsons. “If there is an interest, we can help find the means to take lessons. Settlement gives away \$2 million in financial aid each year to families who qualify. We also have an extensive scholarship program,” she says.

Founded in 1908 by Blanche Wolf Kohn and Jeannette Selig Frank, the school began as the music program at the College Settlement, a charitable institution serving immigrant families in South Philadelphia. Initially, volunteer teachers offered piano lessons for a nickel. Soon after, a full program of instruction took shape, encompassing all musical

instruments and voice instruction, taught by professionals, including members of the Philadelphia Orchestra.

Today, Settlement Music School is the largest employer of musicians in the region, with more than 250 faculty members – all of them with college degrees, almost half with master's degrees and close to 10 percent with doctoral degrees.

“Many are recognized educators and performers in their respective fields,” says Parsons.

In addition, Settlement Music School opens up many opportunities for students, according to Parsons, including:

- Masterclasses with renowned artists;
- Free tickets to concerts;
- Performances, including an annual concert, as well as weekly performances;
- Performance hours and student recitals;
- The chance to audition for ensembles, orchestras and choirs;
- Participation in community and special promotional events of the school;
- Access to music libraries and repertoire;
- Music theory classes to broaden their musical knowledge; and
- On a social level, students often begin long lasting friendships with other students.

Settlement offers individual instruction on all instruments, voice and theory studies, and class instruction including the Suzuki piano, violin, cello and guitar method for very young children. Children also have the opportunity to get involved with the Children's Music Workshop, Fundamentals of Music, ensemble and orchestra programs, and dance-including ballet and jazz.

A Head Start-approved preschool program at two of the school's branches combines music, dance and the visual arts into a comprehensive school readiness program for youngsters in need. The school also offers a children's choir at four branches and an advanced study program for students seeking careers in music. A Teacher Training Institute for daycare and pre-school workers offers college credit workshops and classes for adults who want to learn how to incorporate the arts into their own education programs. And for adults, the school offers the Adult Chamber Players, an adult orchestra, and discounted daytime lessons for students 60 years of age and older.

Parsons says that some of the school's more popular offerings include a summer arts camp, music theater camp and string camp for youngsters. A former member of the hip-hop group The Roots coaches 'tweens who participate in the Summer Jam, classes designed for local garage band members or kids looking to form a band who would also like to learn more about writing music, performing at clubs, cutting a CD, etc.

“We also offer a Taiko Japanese Drumming class for adults and children and they are often asked to perform in the community at special functions,” says Parsons. “This year, the Taiko Drummers will perform at the School's Annual Black Tie Gala.”

Some of the opportunities provided by Settlement are designed to reach students with an interest in modern culture, but

others offer more traditional methods of arts education. Regardless, the school aims to touch people of all backgrounds with the expressive and intellectual wonders of the arts.

For more information on Settlement Music School, visit www.smsmusic.org.

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