

Keys to success: Music-making hones pupils' academic ability

By Sherri Drake Silence

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Highland Oaks Elementary School second- and third-graders are having all kinds of fun with the jazzy new keyboards in music class.

More than likely, the students don't realize that music teacher Brad Foust is using music-making to sharpen their academic skills.

"Mr. Foust said I could play with the harmony," 8-year-old Daelyn Bell told a second-grade classmate while working on a soundtrack on a recent day. "You need to add a horn. They're cool."

Earlier this year, Foust purchased three keyboards (he already had two) with a \$300 technology grant from the West Tennessee Episcopal Church Women.

When he applied for the grant, Foust cited research showing that math scores increase when students work on composing with keyboards. Music also sharpens reading and writing skills.

"It's so amazing that he's doing so much with them to enhance academics with music," said Carol Macon, principal of the school at 5252 Annandale in southeast Shelby County. "He has them writing lyrics ... they are seriously engaged."

The first project for the students was to write and record a story, then compose a soundtrack to accompany their work. In the story, they had to use words such as lion, chimp, wind and surf.

"They just dove right in," Foust said. "It's a lot of coordination, of getting the sound effects to come in the right place in the story."

Second-grader Colin Chapman wrote "The Adventure Book," and included jungle noises on his soundtrack.

The kids get a copy of their work on CD. "They love that," Foust said.

For the next project, students will compose their own piece of music and will be required to play specific rhythmic patterns. They'll create a piano and guitar track.

Macon said she hopes the keyboard projects enhance standardized testing skills and inspire students to continue pursuing music.

"There might be another Gershwin or Mozart over there," Macon said. "You never know."

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