

Bellevue resident starts foundation to bring music education to every child

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Rourke O'Brien is on a mission – and he wants it to sound great.

The Bellevue resident is head of the Childrens Music Foundation, which has developed a program to introduce more music into the classroom and make it a more fundamental part of elementary education.



His first effort is a DVD-format program called First Note, designed for kindergartners and first-graders only. There are about 1,000 students and 45 teachers testing the four-lesson beta version, including some in Bellevue.

"Each lesson has a certain flow to it," O'Brien said. "(It) starts out with the theme song, each has a concept, a reinforcing activity, a word of the day (i.e. tempo) and then there is a visiting guest from another country – at the end there is a review. The next lesson starts by reviewing the last lesson."

Although the Elementary and Secondary Education Act defines music as a core subject, O'Brien believes it is not treated as such.

"If there were music on the SAT," he said, "believe me, there would be music everywhere."

Patricia Campbell, a professor of music at the University of Washington, is a board member of CMF and a curriculum designer for First Note. She also feels music has been neglected.

"(People have) just decided thats not important, were not going to do music every day," she said. "We want to turn that around."

The First Note team brings 50 years of collective experience to the program, and Campbell believes it will be successful.

"What we know does happen," she explained, "if they have everyday music, is that these kids by the end of kindergarten year will be singing in tune and moving in time, which is perfect for moving them on into specialist training with music teachers – but they have got to have this preliminary experience."

State Sen. Rosemary McAuliffe (D-Bothell), supporter of the program, said, "One of the things that we need to recognize is that in the United States our edge is creativity. And we get that through music and the arts."

She said that the program is important, but state budget shortfalls mean that it will need support from individuals.

"Many of us have decided that because there are budget cuts and many of our programs are cut, that we need to step up as a community and support the projects that we know will make a difference in childrens lives," McAuliffe said. "Thats what were doing with the (Childrens Music) Foundation – were starting to come together as a community and fund a project that we think is important for all children.

O'Brien said the goal of the two-year program is to ensure that each student who goes through the program will have written and performed a piece of music.

Campbell said the program is accessible and gives non-music teachers the opportunity to introduce music into childrens lives.

"Were looking at a new way of bringing responsibility and hopefully an invitation to people who aren't music specialists, but who love children, a chance to make music part of childrens environment," she said. "If they don't have musical training, they are not going to be musical – all the neuroscientists say if you don't use these musical synapses, they will die. (Im) hoping that well really make a difference by giving classroom teachers a chance to include music along with everything else. Because kids really love music."

Chelsea Randall is a student in the University of Washington Department of Communication News Laboratory.

The Childrens Music Foundations annual Save The Music campaign runs through June 30. For more information visit cmfinc.org.