

New Haven Register

Music Program Hits High Notes

By Elizabeth Benton
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NEW HAVEN — Two weeks ago, fifth-grader Serena Santiago secured a coveted spot in the John C. Daniels School band.

With interest high and instruments limited, Santiago told band director John Miller she'd be dedicated to whatever he had for her.

The pitch worked. He handed her a trombone.

Serena now walks to school 45 minutes early and stays after for 90 minutes each day to practice, said her mother, Wendy Santiago. Then Serena practices again at home.

"After two weeks, I never sounded like that," Miller said. "They don't know any different. We set the standards right away."

Last year, VH1's Save the Music Foundation gave John C. Daniels 36 instruments to start a school band. The Yale College class of 1957 endowment brought Miller to head the musical instruction, and the **Yale School of Music** has sent six students to work with the band.

This year, the band expanded its focus to include the erhu, a Chinese bowed

instrument to complement the school's new Chinese language instruction.

But interest in band has outpaced the number of available instruments, and the fifth-grade class recently circulated a petition pushing for more spaces in band.

The school is now working with an instrument rental company to help expand the program, but rentals start at \$18 a month.

As the band's eighth-graders move on to high school, their instruments will stay at John C. Daniels.

"We need to find a way to keep kids playing," said Miller. Some students are already working extra projects at home to earn allowance to buy an instrument, he said.

The band is treated "like a scholarship," said school Principal Gina Wells. "You have to keep up your academics," she said.

None of the band students has missed a day of school this year, she said, and many arrive early and stay late to practice, and about 10 students return to school each Saturday for four-hour practices.

“I’ve heard their use of TV and video games has been cut down,” Wells said.

Sergio Morales, 14, and Kimberly Revolorio, 13, had already been playing drums and trumpet when they started playing piano duets last month.

“I just like the way it sounds,” said Kimberly, who now practices piano in the morning and trumpet in the afternoon.

The two were in a group of about a dozen students practicing in the band room on a recent school day while the rest of their classmates were in a general music class.

While Kimberly and Sergio practiced their duet, students on saxophones, flutes, clarinets, drums and trombones worked diligently in pairs or alone as Miller and the Yale musicians circulated.

The intensity has paid off both in musical prowess and academic performance.

Seventh-grader Kevin Lopez won grand prize in a citywide solo competition last year after only six months on the clarinet, and several eighth-graders will now compete for spots in the Connecticut Music Education Association’s regional band.

Math teacher Luis Rosa has been learning guitar along with his students, and has noticed the discipline learned in band spilling over into math class.

“To become a musician, you have to develop a lot of structure, which carries into anything they do in the future,” he said. “They’re very respectful and protective of their instruments. That just becomes a natural outcome of the whole thing.

“Learning an instrument for a kid is better than hours of a video game. It’s really fun to watch the commitment. You just need someone to encourage them, and after that, they just shine.”