

# Students learn life lessons from the Sound of Music

Little Rock teaches that creative expression offers benefits far beyond the classroom. **By David Wish**

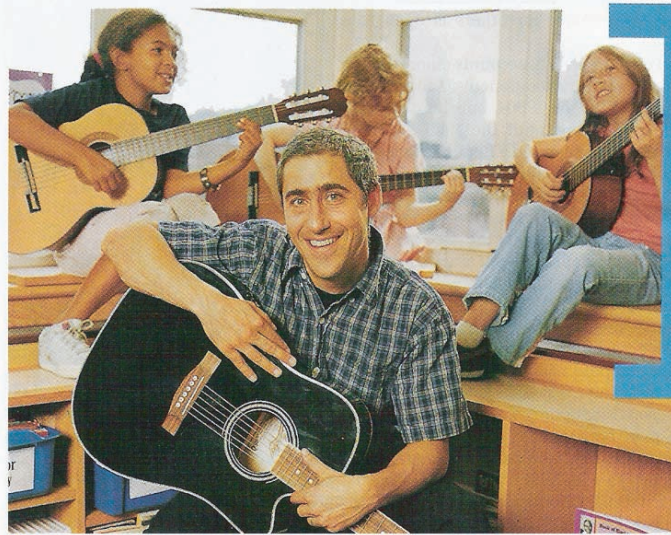
Little Kids Rock traces its origins to the free after-school guitar lessons I began giving my Redwood City, Calif., second graders in 1996. They weren't getting any music class during the school day, and as their Hendrix-loving teacher, I wanted to fill the void.

I was thunderstruck that first year when a boy named Sergio composed a song called *Little Dinosaur* and performed it after a session. Four years later, Sergio's big brother died tragically. After the funeral service, Sergio told me, "Mr. Wish, I wrote a song about my brother. I'd like to play it for you."

Special moments like those make it a real honor to bring music into kids' lives. Whether it becomes a professional career, an active hobby or a cultivated interest, they'll always have it as a friend and companion. Music will be there in their darkest hour, as it was for Sergio when his brother passed away. And it'll be there in their times of joy, when they meet that special guy or girl someday.

So why would anyone want to keep music from them? Why is it that a recent study by the Music For All Foundation showed a 50 percent decline in the number of California students involved with music programs, and a 27 percent decline in the number of music teachers, over the last five years? These were the biggest cuts of any academic area, and, regrettably, they're only indicative of what's happening nationally.

Little Kids Rock is working hard and growing fast to address that educational inequity. By 2001, those early guitar classes had evolved into an organization that now serves more than 4,000 kids at more than 200 schools in four states. Many of the schools are in economically disadvantaged areas. Our mission is to pioneer innovative ways to teach music, to prepare teachers to use those techniques, and to provide instruments and resources that will help them do it, all in the name of rescuing music education.



Melanie Dumea

Shrinking budgets get much of the blame, but to me the true problem is a lack of will, not a lack of resources. The assertion that the most powerful, prosperous and influential nation can't afford to adequately educate its children rings hollow with me. By denying kids music, art and other experiential classes, we're violating the contract between our generation and the next. If we can't teach them to be creative and compassionate problem solvers today, how can we depend on them in the future?

Saying that music education is a frivolous luxury misses the mark as well. Music education can have a broad, lasting impact on a child's future. We've found that these classes enhance academic performance other areas and improve standardized test scores.

Furthermore, a youngster who experiences the joy of creative expression—through music, sculpture, poetry, and other arts—better understands that the thrills of destructive behavior are fleeting. A person can't build a true sense of self-esteem by smashing mailboxes or selling drugs, but he or she can grow by writing a song or playing in a band.

People learn how to resolve problems that arise when they're part of a group effort. They learn the self-confidence that comes from performing before an audience. And they can learn the technology of

music and video production as well as marketing skills.

Convincing administrators and public officials to understand all this is only half our battle, however. Putting the "fun" in fundamental, we've developed a curriculum—including interactive lessons available at [littlekidsrock.org](http://littlekidsrock.org)—more relevant to youngsters. By approaching them through rock 'n roll, from techno to punk to hip-hop to pop, we connect on a level they understand and appreciate. Children want and need more than just institutional knowledge. Educators must engage them with a rich scholastic program that relates to their experiences and interests.

I would like to think that policy makers will ultimately bend to the public's overwhelming support for arts education. Then, all kids will get the music classes they deserve. In the meantime, Little Kids Rock will continue to demonstrate music education's value (and values), thanks in large part to the support of artists like Bonnie Raitt, Tom Waits and former Metallica bassist Jason Newsted.

Last year Newsted jammed with us on a benefit CD. The song he recorded? *Little Dinosaur*. Sergio, his mom and his sister were there for the session.

David Wish is the director of Little Kids Rock.

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