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HEADLINE: Schools find music, art pay off in academics

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BODY:

The "violin room" at Sister Thea Bowman Catholic School is filled with the ragged strains of students practicing, the sounds from their instruments rising and falling like the score to some kind of Appalachian horror movie. Then Philip Tinge steps to the front of the class.

"Rest positions," he commands.

The roomful of fidgety 8-, 9- and 10-year-olds settles into place. The students tuck their instruments under their arms. Then "Mr. Phil" asks them to play Pachelbel's "Canon in D Major," two times through, followed up by "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star." The students raise their bows, pulling them back and forth across the strings. When the music finishes, they bow neatly and look up for the next instructions, quiet and transformed.

For an hour on Tuesdays and Thursdays, each Thea Bowman student, from kindergarten through sixth grade, learns to play the violin -- an instrument chosen specifically because it's so difficult to master.

"The purpose is not to create great violinists," said Sister Janet McCann, the school's principal. "It's to give them that great experience, to learn focus, to learn discipline, to create the whole child."

For a small parochial school in a distressed city, it's an ambitious and expensive program, but it has quickly started paying academic and social dividends, school officials say.

In the late 1990s, McCann was principal at Holy Trinity Catholic School, on Mallinckrodt Street, in north St. Louis. The school was struggling, McCann said, and administrators were looking for a way to "reclaim its mission." School officials began searching around for a way to recharge the school. They came across a New York City-based program called Education Through Music and the Arts, a program that intertwines music, fine, visual and performing arts with academics.

They decided the program was a perfect way to recast the school, and through donations and grants,

launched it at Holy Trinity in 1998.

"Students who weren't successful in traditional academic areas were shining," McCann said. "Kids who were strong academically were asking the other kids how to hold a bow. . . . I could see an increase in students wanting to come to school, kids being excited to learn."

McCann also said students who had been chronically late or absent instead showed up on time. Those who had problems concentrating learned how to focus better. Behavioral problems subsided. One day, she showed up at Holy Trinity and saw a group of students ballroom-dancing in the parking lot, practicing the steps they'd learned in class.

In 2004, when McCann moved to Thea Bowman, she saw the same needs and the same opportunities to make the program work. The school sought donations, bought 75 violins at about \$250 each, and began hiring new staff.

The program employs "teaching artisans" -- working violinists, dancers, performing and visual artists -- to teach the students and their classroom teachers their art. The classroom teachers learn to play the violin, dance or paint, and then integrate the arts into traditional academics. For example, to help teach a student about grammar or math, they'll make the connection to a piece of music or refer to a musical skill.

"In violin (class), they have to stand in rest position," said Allison Gaubatz, a fourth- and fifth-grade teacher at the school. "When they come into the classroom, they have to use the same skill. . . . We're learning fractions now, and I'll say, 'This is like violin. If you miss something, you're going to be lost.'"

While there haven't been any scientific studies that show a direct link between exposure to the arts and high academic performance, dozens of studies show a correlation, according to Larry Peeno, deputy executive director of the National Art Education Association.

"Research in education has rarely, if ever, used a scientific methodology," Peeno said. "But this seems to work."

Schools across the country that have cut arts programs in lean economic times have reinstated them after realizing that academic performance suffered in their absence, Peeno said. At least two states -- Virginia and Arkansas -- recently mandated that all public schools offer art classes.

For Holy Trinity and Theo Bowman, the arts have become an integral part of their mission as Catholic schools. That, McCann admits, is an unusual relationship.

"The perception of Catholic schools -- as academic, disciplined -- is, for most people, what flashes through their minds," McCann said. But an emphasis on the arts is helping both schools achieve their traditional academic goals.

Said Gaubatz, "These kids, they want to give up so easily in math and reading, so I say, 'Let's think about the violin.' I'll say, 'Think about our Advent prayer service. We played and it sounded so good, and there was applause.' It reminds them not to give up."