



Helping Students Pursue Their Passion

by Sundas Mohi

When a student wants to be in our music program but their family doesn't understand its value and wants them to drop out, I often share my personal story to help them understand how music education can benefit their child's future. If you have students in this situation, I hope that offering the following information can help them remain in your program and continue to benefit from your instruction.

In their twenties, my parents immigrated to the United States from Pakistan. I grew up in a largely South Asian cultural environment, but I was also obviously influenced by the American culture I experienced in school and in my daily life. I have found that in South Asian culture, there is great social pressure to impress those around you in every possible way—what others think of you is quite important. I believe this is a big reason why there is so much pressure to pursue careers in “prestigious” fields, such as medicine, engineering, or law.

When I was in school, I never thought about what I would do when I grew up, and no one asked me what I wanted. I assumed I would be a doctor because that is what I was told to do. By the time I began discovering a love for music, it was already time to apply to college, so I stuck with my original plan. I majored in biology and viola performance because I heard that music majors were

accepted into medical school at a higher rate than other majors. It wasn't until my sophomore year of college that I really started to ponder why I enjoyed music so much, and it didn't take long to realize that my love for music went beyond performing for fun.

My family was shocked when I told them I wanted to switch majors to music education and pursue a career in teaching. They worried about my financial security and thought I was making the wrong decision. Several times I heard, “What will so-and-so think of you?” It took me a long time to understand that in Pakistan, being a teacher is not a well-respected career because there is no formal education required to teach in a school. Quite often, I also heard, “Why don't you want to be a doctor? Don't you want to help people?” I found it difficult to convince them that while I may not be helping people in the way doctors do, I still help people every day and am very passionate about it. I love supporting students as they discover who they are, and I love helping them through their daily struggles. I believe this is the best way I can help people. Another frequent comment from my community was, “You're so smart! Why would you want to be a teacher?” This always led me to respond with the perplexed question of why anyone wouldn't want their child's teacher to be smart.

Finding a balance between defending what I wanted to do while maintaining respectful relationships with my parents and

my circle of involved family, friends, and acquaintances was probably the most difficult part of this time in my life. I experienced a great amount of pressure. I didn't want to disappoint anyone, but I also knew what I wanted to do with my life, and I

decided that was my choice to make.

The best thing that happened during this struggle was that my teachers and professors went out of their way to advise, encourage, and support me. They educated me about a career in music education by

doing things like guiding me around my first TMEA convention, taking time out of their day to speak with my parents, helping me establish connections by introducing me to other teachers, and, of course, offering teaching advice. They frequently checked in on me, and I developed a close relationship with many of them. I felt comfortable speaking to them in times of frustration, and it was wonderful to have their support.

Likewise, I believe the most helpful thing you can do as an educator for students in this situation is to be there for them and encourage them to keep doing their best. Tell them you are proud of them and tell them specific things they are doing well. They may not be hearing this type of encouragement about their musical accomplishments at home, so it is important for them to hear it from you.

Helping My Parents Understand

I had a perfect GPA in college and had finished almost all my premed classes when I decided to depart that path and follow my heart into the field of music education. We had already invested time and money in MCAT preparation classes,

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and I was about to start narrowing down which medical schools I would apply to. My parents and I had a strained relationship during this time, and this was very hard.

To help them understand more about careers in music, I did a lot of research about teacher salaries, managing finances, and budgeting to show them that it was possible to live comfortably. Because I did all of this at a young age, I believe I was much more prepared to start my life as a music teacher. Though I did not need to work to pay for school and did not leave college with student debt, I still worked three jobs because I wanted to start saving money as soon as possible.

When I began teaching with the UTSA String Project, I invited my parents to our concerts. As a high school teacher, I still invite them to our concerts, and I often share stories about my teaching with them. As time passes, their perspective is changing. They are starting to see that it is possible for me to be financially stable and independent and truly love every day I get to spend with students. At the end of the day, I think every parent just wants their child to be safe and happy.

Sharing the Value of Music Study

Parents who are unsupportive are often this way simply because they do not know the benefits of fine arts, or they may not know their child's potential for success in fine arts (even if it is obvious to you). When I teach a student whose parents seem unsupportive, I send a positive email about the student's progress or accomplishments, and I explain that success in fine arts is not something that comes easily to every fine arts student—that their child is special and gifted and has potential to be amazing. I also regularly check in with the student (as my teachers did for me), even after they graduate. We are all busy, but we must understand the impact that even having a short conversation or email or text exchange can have on their lives. I am a music educator now because my teachers did this for me.

Sundas Mohi is the Assistant Orchestra Director at Tompkins High School in Katy ISD.

University Admissions Value Music Study

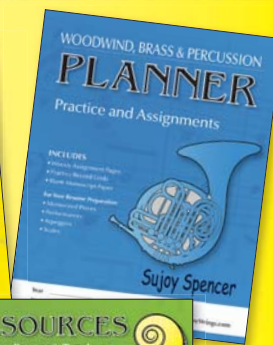
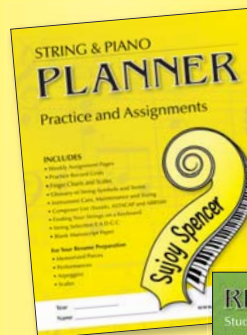
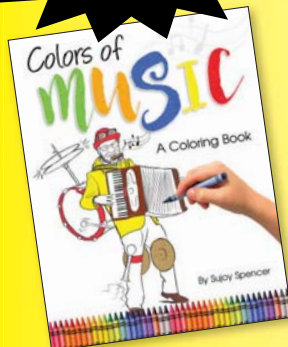
Some parents have the notion that studying music is a hobby and that it simply takes up too much time. At our school's annual orchestra parent meeting, I share a presentation that includes data from current research about the emotional and developmental benefits of music study. I highlight information from top-tier universities about what they look for in prospective students, as well as testimonials from alumni about the impact participation in music has had on their lives. Colleges look beyond GPA, grades, and SAT scores. If a student already has good grades, involvement in a fine art further benefits their application. When I speak with admissions officers about their selection process, they often say that anything that differentiates one student from another is going to help them have a chance of being admitted. Including their experience in fine arts as part of their application is a great way to help them stand out. Additionally, music study can lead to scholarship opportunities even for students who don't pursue a career in music.

I include the following quotes from university admissions officers in this presentation. These regional admissions officers are the ones who review applications for our region of the state, and it has been very helpful to share their words with our community. Even though the ideas are obvious to us, it is much more credible for parents when it comes directly from the source.

- *We are looking beyond the academic profile, for students who make an impact in some way and who are following their passion when possible.* —Rachel Brown, Harvard University
- *It is too competitive to take students who just have good grades. It's not enough to be good at school; there's gotta be something else.* —Rachel Brown, Harvard University
- *All students who apply here have generally excelled in their academic career. What distinguishes students in the application pool are the experiences outside of their academic career. High school should be fun and enjoyable.* —Kate Noonan, Rice University

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