

DISPELLING THE MYTHS OF TEACHING IN A TITLE I SCHOOL

BY ERIC JIMENEZ & JUSTIN MCLEAN

We met during our undergraduate studies at Prairie View A&M University—two educators of color committed to returning home to serve schools much like the ones in which we were raised. We understood the positive impact our band directors had on us, and because of it, we were committed to paying it forward. Since then, we've had the honor of working side-by-side to enhance band and other music programs across the Houston area. During our time serving the Houston ISD, we spent most conference periods immersed in brainstorming discussions. *How could we overcome the frequent challenges in our teaching environment?*

Years of these honest, solution-focused discussions led us to create *The Score*, an urban music education podcast. Through it, we offer urban music educators a platform to share their success stories. Our aim is to foster a renewed and positive conversation instead of the metanarrative filled with assumptions and stereotypes. What we offer in this article is based on our podcast's episode 36, "Be Willing to Teach Us, Too."

Regardless the type of school you teach in, we hope you will gain a greater understanding for and appreciation of students like us and the educators who serve them as you read our responses to the following myths about teaching in a Title I school:

TITLE I STUDENTS AND MUSIC PROGRAMS ARE NO DIFFERENT FROM SCHOOLS WITH QUALITY FUNDING OR FINANCIALLY ASTUTE DEMOGRAPHICS. AT THE CORE, THEY ARE ALL BLANK CANVASES WITH THE POTENTIAL TO CREATE COLORFULLY RICH EXPERIENCES AND LEAVE LASTING IMPRESSIONS.

population school, students might need to work after school or go home to take care of younger siblings. These commitments aren't indicators of disinterest in their education; they are a reflection of their family's economic instability. Instead of viewing these students through a deficit lens, understand them as students who need nontraditional strategies to teach them, and find ways to create access for them to participate. This may be especially true for teachers whose educational background does not reflect the environment or demographics of a Title I school. Students in urban and low socioeconomic schools often need teachers who will stand the test of time, get to know them, and

be invested in their well-being. Once that relationship is established, students can show they are committed to you and the content.



THERE'S NO MONEY FOR GOOD MATERIALS OR INSTRUMENTS

This statement is broad enough to be true for many. We have served in schools and music programs with \$0 budgets, but this didn't deter us from providing a quality music education. We consistently held fundraisers, solicited sponsors, and created a community instrument donation campaign. We did that to reduce student fees so low that a lack of disposable income in our student families would not prohibit their participation. We also recommend creating payment plans to help families understand your commitment to their child's participation in your program. This might require some to reflect on existing biases toward the economic stability of your students' families. We knew these methods would be more work on our part. But we also knew they were the right things to do to ensure our students enjoyed the best music education experience possible.



TITLE I STUDENTS DON'T CARE ABOUT GETTING AN EDUCATION

This is an example of bringing implicit or covert bias into the classroom. For example, in a majority Latino student

IT WILL ALWAYS LOOK GOOD ON YOUR RÉSUMÉ IF YOU HAVE DONE THE WORK TO BUILD UP A TITLE I SCHOOL. THAT TAKES COURAGE AND IT TAKES INTEGRITY.



THOSE SCHOOLS ARE DANGEROUS

This statement is misleading and can carry so many false assumptions. I still recall many experiences of doors being abruptly locked, purses being clutched, and people crossing the street to avoid proximity with me. If we don't allow for self-reflection and deprogramming of our personal prejudices, these biases can be carried into how we treat students in our classrooms. "Those schools are dangerous" is usually stated by someone with little or no experience serving Title I schools. We've heard similar statements from clinicians throughout our careers. However, their visits were often followed with positive messages and willingness to return to help. Some have openly admitted their false assumptions and felt comfortable enough to share them with us. Kids are kids, yes. But these are the very same kids who might require the willingness of an individual to set aside any preexisting biases or assumptions to truly be of help.



PARENTS WON'T BE INVOLVED OR SUPPORTIVE

This statement has been consistently shared throughout our careers as students and as educators. *Eric:* As a Latino educator, when I went back to serve schools with parents who mirrored my lived experience, I recognized my parents in those of my students. I reflected on all the time and effort my parents dedicated just to make ends meet, and through that, how they never discouraged me from excelling in my academics or arts involvement. I also have found some parents are unaware of their rights or abilities to participate if given the opportunity. We recommend providing parents and guardians an environment that is open, inviting, and celebratory of their involvement. We also recommend encouraging parental support in a variety of accessible ways—material donations, providing meals, transportation for other students, and volunteer hours.



THOSE SCHOOLS HAVE MORE DISCIPLINE PROBLEMS

Statistically speaking, this may be true. Unfortunately, it may stem from the perceptions teachers have of their students of color or low socioeconomic status. The way our students respond to behavior issues might be defense mechanisms and a reflection of their environment for survival. In our 10+ years of serving as educators, we have never written a discipline form. Instead, we found various solutions for redirecting behavior through open conversation, restorative practices, or the involvement of the school counselor. We invite teachers to find alternative ways to redirect misbehavior instead of relying on the traditional methods, which can ultimately lead to more issues throughout the year.



TITLE I ADMINISTRATORS AREN'T SUPPORTIVE

It's simple: administrators support the positive things that bring quality attention and shine to their respective campus. They don't have favorites as much as they react to *what you've done for our school lately*. And while that may sound

like the beginning of favoritism, it's really about the level of effort and consistency being offered. Whether it is an athletic organization, educational club, or fine arts program, administrators want consistency.

I have always worked with administrators who went above and beyond for my program and me. Whether it was class scheduling, instrument funds, or support with parents, administrators helped because I was consistent. I remained consistent in my focus on classroom management, encouraging students to be leaders outside my room, and building strong teacher-parent relationships. It is a big plus when matters aren't automatically escalated to the administrator's office. Any time you go into a new educational environment it should be with an open mind, ready to focus, to build, and to develop.



THOSE MUSIC PROGRAMS DON'T GET GOOD RATINGS

Good ratings aren't limited to highly funded schools or the districts in which you may be currently indoctrinated to pursue jobs. Although those districts and the schools in them are decorated with first divisions and Sweepstakes awards, it wasn't the school or the district itself that produced those good ratings. That kind of achievement requires two things. The first is relationships. If you want to achieve good ratings, I suggest you shift your focus toward investing in and building teacher-student relationships.

We constantly teach our students about the various relationships in music, whether it's the connection of tonality and intonation, the idea of melody and accompaniment, or the aspect of conductor and ensemble in a performance context. Yet we forget to extend that knowledge and theory to the students sitting directly in front of us, resulting in a lack of real connection or buy-in from them. In a Title I school or district, understand that good ratings not only come from consistent and high-quality programming and teaching but also from student investment. Your students must know and believe they aren't pawns in your classroom but are co-laborers in the goal of musical excellence.

The second important aspect in achievement is identifying what *good ratings* are for you and what you hope to attain in the process of working toward them. Never settle for lackluster work ethic or performance below the standards to which you've aspired for your program and your students. Remember to build strong relationships, clearly define your good rating, and consistently program to meet those nonnegotiables, and you will always be satisfied.



IT WON'T LOOK GOOD ON MY RÉSUMÉ/OTHER EDUCATORS DON'T RESPECT TITLE I TEACHERS

It will always look good on your résumé if you have done the work to build up a Title I school. That takes courage and it takes integrity. I have always found that willingness to devote my energy to building up programs spoke for itself. We often think of prestigious universities as great places because of the great minds who attended them and the legacies they left behind. Much like

the marks left by those great minds, your résumé is a collection of the places your DNA of work and professionalism has built into something greater.

Responding to the idea that other music educators will not respect you as a Title I teacher, understand this: the respect of other educators is not what we do this for. While the well wishes and acknowledgments of great work are obviously appreciated, constantly seeking respect or affirmation from other educators (who would probably advise you not to work in a Title I environment in the first place) will never be a good use of our energy. In this work, we need to be concerned less about our peers and more about our students. How will our great work be remembered by the community and especially the students—the young malleable minds we choose to invest in and build up every day?



I'LL HAVE TO LOWER MY EXPECTATIONS

Often a Title I school or district tends to look different from the usually celebrated *places to be or teach*. This can lead to the thought that expectations are lower, or nonexistent. I would ask that you shift those thoughts to the following perspective: *expectations come directly from the leaders/teachers who ultimately define them and refuse to settle for anything less*. Show me a great organization, team, or corporation, and I can pinpoint the person who developed and shaped that specific identity connected with that group.

The schools where I have taught have been even more willing to reach and attain the expectations I set and modeled. Lowering your expectations won't be of any service to your school or district. In fact, it shows a lack of integrity and care not only for the institution of music education but also for the students in your band hall.

Title I students and music programs are no different from schools with quality funding or financially astute demographics. At the core, they are all blank canvases with the potential to create colorfully rich experiences and leave lasting impressions. Now, the Title I canvas will require extra time and creative effort may be needed to obtain the tools to paint such a beautiful picture. Still, never doubt that the opportunity to create the beautiful picture exists.

As you keep thinking on this topic, consider these questions: *What are your personal expectations for your career and have they been shaped by the utopian language of your previous music professors and directors? Have you yet to build something simply for the purpose of being a great educator?* Expectations begin with you.

VISIBILITY CAN LEAD TO REPRESENTATION

As we work to dispel myths about teaching in schools like ours or students who look like us, we would also like to encourage our colleagues to provide opportunities for their students of color to see themselves as music educators. If our music programs accurately reflect the demographics of the school population we serve, it leads to more visibility. Furthermore, this visibility leads to representation, which provided us, two students of color, the ability to see music education as a viable profession. 

Eric Jimenez is Assistant Director of Bands at Prairie View A&M University. Justin McLean is Director of Percussion/Assistant Director of Bands at Hightower HS and Lake Olympia MS (Fort Bend ISD). *The Score* podcast can be found at www.revivalmusicproject.org and on all major podcast platforms.

Music Makes Me the Best Version of Me That I Could Be

When Jamsel got into a middle school music class, he finally found where he belonged and felt welcomed, and as a mariachi musician, he's discovered a new connection with his family. Now he wants to be a band director so he can share his passion with others. Share Jamsel's story with your students and community. Advocate for music education by sharing these compelling personal stories at www.tmea.org/itstartswithmusic.



Music Makes Me the Best Version of Me

