



# Changing Lives Through Inclusive Music Education

By Jessica Olson, Amy Rogers, and Tiffany Huebner

**A**n autistic student writes well-formed music notes on the marker board for a class to play back. A nonverbal high schooler performs sign language to a popular movie tune in front of the student body. A student with significant physical disabilities plays the Boomwhackers in time within an ensemble. An introverted high school senior develops public speaking skills while teaching a lesson about jazz. A junior realizes their interest in becoming a special education teacher. Students who don't typically fit in on campus are greeted with hugs and celebrity-style welcomes. This is the daily experience in our Music Partners class.

Music Partners is a two-semester, for-credit course offered at Central HS in San Angelo ISD. Students receiving special education services are partnered with other high school students in an interactive music education class, taught by a certified music educator and board-certified music therapist. This course satisfies the fine arts credit required for graduation.

Beyond satisfying the course requirements for graduation, Music Partners often helps students find a new path they may not have considered pursuing after high school. Bethany Haire, a 2023 graduate of Central HS and two-year member of the Music Partners class says, "Music Partners was the perfect introduction into the field of helping people with special needs, and I'm so grateful I

got to learn and have fun in that class. I now work at a facility for adults with special needs and I wouldn't have this passion without Music Partners!"

Some students have not only realized a passion for helping others with special needs but also discovered that while they are helping students with special needs, those students are making a difference in their lives as well. Zeila Cano, a current CHS senior had this to say: "Music Partners isn't just an elective to me. It's a program where I learned how to help others and give my love for music to my special-needs friends. This class has shown me how little things can make a big impact and difference for students just by giving them my attention and effort. I will always be happy to know that these kids will have memories we were able to make that they can cherish forever!"

We have seen the way this class impacts students on campus during passing periods or at games. When they see each other, they say hello or give a fist bump. It is so meaningful for the students with special needs to be acknowledged by their general education peers. One example of this inclusion happened last year. A Music Partners student was a member of the school dance team, the TexAnns. She choreographed a dance for some of the partners and members of the dance team to be performed at the spring show. I had several parents tell me how much it meant to them to





*No matter the struggles or differences you have, Mrs. Olson is always able to help you learn about all kinds of music and to put a smile on your face. Being able to help these friends makes a difference in their lives and my life too! —Lauren Wood, CHS Junior*

have their child included in such a meaningful way. They felt seen and celebrated. Music Partners helps foster an environment where all students are included and accepted.

## COURSE STRUCTURE

Central HS offers two sections of Music Partners, which meet in the choir room. The course objectives were set using input from high school special education teachers, elementary and high school music educators, a music therapist, and district fine arts personnel. High school music TEKS and their prerequisite skills were also used to create the course's curriculum.

The music therapist plans and implements a live lesson once per week. They modify instruments and curriculum to help best meet the needs of students, create visuals to be projected on the classroom screen via teacher iPad sharing, and include ideas, videos, content, songs, and strategies. The music educator/classroom teacher instructs the students for the remaining four classes of the week, repeating songs and strategies and practicing the concepts presented. The music educator is responsible for attendance and grades.

Currently, the Music Partners program content is divided into four quarters. The first quarter focuses on rhythm; primary instruments utilized in class are the drum pads with drumsticks, bucket drums, circle drums, and other percussion instruments. The second quarter focuses on melody and harmony, with the introduction and instruction of the music staff and note reading. In this quarter, we use keyboards, Boomwhackers, and color-

coordinating visuals most often (Music-Go-Rounds). The third quarter addresses vocal and singing skills, using solfège and Kodály hand signs, as well as sign language to offer an adapted method of participation for nonverbal students.

The final quarter of the course focuses on pulling all the concepts together. We study instruments and instrument families and collaborate with the band and orchestra teachers to have instrument demonstrations for the class. With assistance, Music Partner students can play as many instruments as they wish. These visits are a true course highlight. To finish out the year, we study at least five music genres, discussing their distinctive sounds and instruments, well-known composers, and core characteristics. We listen to and play along with a variety of songs from the genre of the week. Students enjoy selecting songs from the genre of the week to play along with, dance to, or sing with, karaoke style.

In the spring, typically near the end of the third quarter or just prior to spring break, the combined Music Partners classes perform a sampling of songs and skills addressed in class for parents, peers, and staff. Students at the school now look forward to this performance, and other organizations and classes have become involved to assist on performance day. The performance skills, confidence, excitement, and pride the students display in their accomplishments is truly evident and irreplaceable.

## GRADING MUSIC PARTNERS

Each quarter, the partners receive a major grade from assisting with teaching the

class in a small project. During the rhythm focus quarter, students create and notate a rhythm. Then, they teach the rest of the class to play that rhythm. In the second quarter, partners compose a melody, notate on either treble or bass clef correctly, and again present it for the rest of the class to play together. The third quarter major grade is helping set up, rehearse, clean up, and lead during the performance.

The final quarter assignment is to teach a 5–10-minute lesson on a genre. Students select songs from the assigned genre to play instruments with and another song to choreograph movement or dance to (parachute, ribbon wands, or body percussion are top favorites). They also create a slide presentation with information and visuals to accompany their lesson. Each assignment offers the partners an opportunity to create a short lesson, song, or example and help teach it to the class. This allows partners to develop their own creative style and share it with the students in the class.

## MUSIC PARTNERS BENEFITS ALL

This diverse, live music-making Music Partners course allows students with a variety of physical and cognitive disabilities to learn from, engage in, and enjoy an age- and skill- appropriate music environment, alongside their same-age peers. All enrolled students are consistently developing new musical and social skills, laughing and dancing together with enjoyment. Each year's group of partners is diverse, and this helps foster genuine connections and friendships that develop throughout the year.



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