

Spotlight On...

Holyoke High School

Holyoke High School's music program, under the direction of Mr. Mark Todd, has flourished since he was hired in 1995. The growth of the program is the result of three essential components: investment of time and effort, students that are devoted to the process, and determination to succeed for the students, no matter what the cost.

After graduating from Westfield State College, Mark was hired to teach music in the Springfield Public Schools, including his alma mater, Classical High School. His stint included eventful times for the city: passage of a residency requirement for all Springfield teachers; a teachers' strike; and the passage of Proposition 2 __. Highlights of his tenure in Springfield include his Jazz Rock Singers performing at the Hatch Shell in Boston, representing Massachusetts at the bicentennial celebration of the signing of the Constitution in Philadelphia, and producing musicals with all four public high schools at Springfield Symphony Hall.

Mark left education for a period of time to pursue a different career to support his young family. Subsequently, he returned to education and was rehired by the Springfield Public Schools to teach at Kiley Middle School for three years. He was then hired by the Holyoke Public Schools to teach at its high school. He found that the choral program was a "dumping ground" for students but he also saw great potential in what Holyoke High could offer.

The first additions to the Holyoke High music department were two after school opportunities: Madrigal Singers (a select choral ensemble) and Bell Choir (at the time, Holyoke High owned two octaves of hand bells). The Madrigal Singers is now an honors class that meets during the school day and has represented Holyoke High School at countless regional and state events, including the 2001 Massachusetts Democratic Convention and Governor Mitt Romney's first State of the Commonwealth address in 2004. The Holyoke High School Bell Choir, now with three octaves of hand bells, is also a class that meets during the school day and is among the few high school bell choirs in the state.

Holyoke High School also boasts a music technology lab. In its eighth year, the lab boasts impressive hardware (brand new iMacs) and software to aid students with composition and learning about music theory. Students that successfully pass the music technology class are awarded five college credits from Holyoke Community College under an articulation agreement through the Technology Preparation department.

The annual Holyoke High School musical may be the most notable facet of the program. When Mark held the first meeting for those interested in participating eleven years ago, 94 students showed up; none, however, could read music. Lots of one-on-one time contributed to a very successful first musical. Now, eleven years later, all participating students are well versed in how to read music. Holyoke High's musicals include complex sets, excellent singing, and individual microphones, creating the feel of a professional production. Thanks to former mayor Michael Sullivan's efforts, Holyoke High's auditorium was renovated, making these large-scale productions possible.

Mark, as K-12 music department chairperson for the Holyoke Public Schools for the past year and a half, has also been working to enhance the music education of K-8 students. Thanks to \$191,000 in funding secured by the school department's curriculum director, Kim Wells, teachers at all seven K-8 schools will receive training in "Making Music," an interactive technology and language inclusive curricular program by Silver Burdett. Every teacher will also have access to a laptop, data projector, iPod Touch (with over 10,000 songs on each), and Bose speaker system on carts to use in classrooms. Additionally, string teachers have been hired to start building a string orchestra program.

While speaking with Mark, one can clearly feel the passion he has for urban music education. He offers some advice for those in similar situations:

"You've got to get to every kid you can. You can't ignore anybody. You've got to make every effort to do that. We lose programs to budget constraints and we try to build them back up again, but you can't quit. You got to stay with it . . . stay on the path. Don't get discouraged! If you're discouraged and your kids see that, then it's over. Your kids will go with you all the way. We need to make sure that the kids get what they need in their lives so no one is left behind . . . giving them something that they will always cherish and share with their families."