

Spotlight On...

Springfield's HS of Science and Technology

The band program at Springfield's High School of Science and Technology has been making a strong comeback thanks to the efforts of its students and its director, Gary Bernice.

The Springfield Public Schools hired Bernice, a Fall 2006 graduate of the University of Massachusetts Amherst, in January 2007 to jumpstart the high school's band program, which already had two directors that year. The young director, originally from New Jersey, arrived in Springfield fresh from his practicum in Dorchester and Roxbury. He had also just written his undergraduate thesis on students' beliefs about relevant curriculum in the secondary urban music classroom, which included a survey for students in what they thought should be taught in the urban public schools. Data collection for that survey and interacting with students were among the factors that inspired him to work in an urban setting.

Twenty students were in the program when Bernice started. Most students did not know how to play an instrument, did not have an instrument, or did not have the money to rent an instrument. They mostly sat around and played cards. Now, student participation is approaching 100. Each student has an assigned instrument. Ninety-minute band rehearsals include a structured warm-up, repertoire rehearsal, and playing test, followed by students conducting sectionals and giving private lessons after school. How did Bernice achieve this turnaround?

"Urban students don't have the same resources as other towns but they have the same capabilities as everyone else," he said. "Expectations for them need to be high at all times. They can achieve the same as all other students. Don't dumb it down . . . raise the expectations. These students start and end in different places but the expectations should always remain high."

Bernice also credits his students for "taking ownership of the program and being self-motivating." The ownership process includes students recommending and arranging repertoire to be performed that allows students to grow and expand their skills. Bernice explained that "this process builds a bridge to 'proper' literature." Bernice also helps students use rhythms that they are familiar with and listen to and puts them into music to be performed – "taking what they know and making it relevant to them," according to Bernice. This is part of his philosophy of ". . . learning the basics now and branching out to different types of music by writing actual rhythms and using students' ears. This encourages ears and reading."

Student leadership is evident throughout the program. It includes a band council, section leaders, and a leadership hierarchy from drum major to brass, woodwind, and percussion captains.

The bands at the High School of Science and Technology keep a busy schedule, including performing at two large yearly events at other schools in Springfield (the High School of Science and Technology does not have an auditorium), performing for eighth

graders at the middle schools as part of a recruiting tour, UMass' Founders Day, and for school events to maintain visibility and recruit potential members.

A sponsorship program is in place for those who wish to donate money for new instruments. Sponsors have included community members, churches, businesses, educators, and students themselves. Over \$10,000 has been raised for new instruments. Most of the instruments that students perform on are school owned instruments. Administrative support for instrument repairs and supplies is on the rise. Students also receive private lessons after school from Bernice on a regular basis for free. Bernice does not receive a stipend for his after school services, but he feels the weekly lessons are essential for students to "reach a level of mastery on their instrument."

Bernice cites the collaborative nature of music making as the key factor for the flourishing urban music program's continuing success:

"[Working in an urban school] every day is extremely hard. Part of the reward is the challenge. It's exciting. The challenge is the motivation. How do you create something out of nothing? It's something you can't do alone. You have to do it with the students, with the faculty. What better way to do that than through music? Nothing else can do that better than music. There's no other way to create that sense of community than through music."