

# Musically Bridging the Gap



Program children practice their instruments.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF DC YOUTH ORCHESTRA PROGRAM

## Changing the statistics in the District

By J. Deveaux

The District ranks 51st in eighth grade reading and math proficiency, according to the Corporation for Enterprise Development 2009-2010 Assets and Opportunity Scorecard. This information is based on race, income and gender. The CFED also keeps track of policy priorities in regards to this.

"[Kids] need to have some place where they belong, where they feel important. Our place is to provide [this for them]," said Ava Sepece, executive director of the D.C. Youth Orchestra Program, which provides children across the economic spectrum with opportunities to interact with one another and to learn and perform music.

Sepece describes music as an area of learning that helps children develop other skills. She goes on to describe how children that learn in an ensemble setting become more proficient in math and are less likely to drop out of school. This organization does not keep track of the specific statistics associated with single parent homes and living situations associated with their students.

The Annie E. Casey Foundation uses data sheet from the Census Bureau to come up with percentages of the children in the D.C. population that are from single parent households and in poverty. As of 2008, there were 28,000 children in poverty, 26% of the population. In the same year 59,000 children were in single parent families, 57% of the population.

This program "mirrors the demographics of the city," in Sepece's words, with 60% African American students and 85% minority, over all. Most of the children involved with this program go to college. Sepece estimates that 95% of her kids advance to 2 to 4 year programs.

The CFED asserts that in D.C., gender and income are not obstacles to attaining a college degree. However, when it comes to the effect of race on pursuit of higher educa-

tion, D.C. is ranked 51st, the lowest in the nation. The media relations manager for the CFED, Kristen Lawton, reads the percentage of people in D.C. that attain a high school degree based on the same criteria, "89% of people in D.C. get their high school degree."

Sepece took the time to mention a speech she gave on March 27, 2009 to the National Endowment for the Arts. In it she says,

"Very few of our students come from affluent households and most of them are D.C. residents. Many of them attend schools with limited music education resources. Music is a field that is often dominated by those who have been given the best private instruction, at the best institutions, with the best musical instruments available, and in general our students do not have these advantages. In the last three years, 25% of the students in the program received scholarships or heavily subsidized tuition discounts."

She goes on to describe what her program provides in contrast to other orchestra programs in D.C.

"And the D.C. Youth Orchestra Program offers 17 times the number of classes that other area youth orchestra programs offer. Without our funders and donors, the program would simply not survive. In addition to our regular program, we also have multiple outreach projects in area schools and at Department of Parks and Recreation facilities, offering free classes to students in D.C. and helping children to make productive use of after-school time. Music does have the power to bring academic success to children who might not otherwise find it . . . If any of you doubt this, let me tell you that in the last four years 100% of the students who graduated from the DCYOP also graduated from high school.

By contrast, according to *Education Week*, the graduation rate in D.C. Public Schools was 57.6% while and the national average is 70.6%."

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