



MISSION

To provide musical performance experiences for students with special needs through peer mentorship.

OBJECTIVES

To support music and special education teachers through professional development and individualized training to create musical peer mentoring clubs in their schools.

To provide curriculum to students with special needs that enables them to learn an instrument at a personally modified level and perform alongside their general education peers.

To create authentic teaching and leadership opportunities for general education students to serve as peer mentors and guides to special education students in their schools through specialized training, structure, curriculum, and ongoing support.

DESCRIPTION

United Sound is a school-based instrumental music program with the goal of increasing access to quality arts education for students with disabilities (New Musicians). Dedicated to promoting social involvement through shared ensemble performance experience, United Sound joins disabled students with general education band and orchestra students (Peer Mentors) to learn and perform together.

The program is run by a music teacher and special education teacher. These teachers partner together and volunteer their time to train Peer Mentors, guide musical learning, and provide foundation and stability to the program. With this army of volunteers, we are able to reach a huge number of students with low costs to the organization.

United Sound helps teachers create a program for students with disabilities that works and is sustainable because of its simplicity by:

- Providing one-on-one professional development for music and special education teachers which not only discusses proven strategies for inclusion, but also gives them the tools necessary to complete an additional 2 hours of training with their students (Peer Mentors) on how to be effective mentors.
- Facilitating monthly virtual group training meetings for teachers and mentors. These meetings highlight new lesson ideas, prepare students for upcoming opportunities and challenges, and are led by the expertise of our Inclusion and Disability Specialist.
- Providing specialized curriculum designed for students with disabilities to increase access to arts education and assist Peer Mentors to teach New Musicians to play an instrument of their choice at a personally modified level.
- Coordinating local and national performance opportunities to demonstrate best inclusion practices, create significant arts learning experiences for performers,

inspire independence and self-confidence in participants, and showcase inclusion to the community as a whole.

When the program begins, each New Musician is paired with 3 Peer Mentors and provided with method books, lesson plans, and materials that enable the musical learning to begin right away. Most of our New Musicians are beginning to read and understand music and make "first sounds" on their instruments during the very first rehearsal.

Programs at each school meet at least once per week and involve, on average, 24 students who are supervised by both the music and special education teachers.

Alternating between small group lessons and ensemble rehearsals, the New Musicians learn a piece of music (using modified parts written by their Peer Mentors) that they will then perform live in concert, at least twice each year, with their Peer Mentors and a full instrumental support ensemble.

Participation in United Sound has the life-long effect of creating a huge body of people who will work better together, mutually respect each other, understand each other, and protect each other from discrimination and harm. This, above everything else, is the importance of our work.

VISION

Our vision is to create a generation of young people who are active and engaged members of their local communities. Through the opportunity of music-making and music-service with students they would not normally interact, students involved with United Sound form relationships, learn to work together, and find out that their similarities far outweigh their differences. Students with special needs gain confidence and social connectedness from friendships and are empowered by their own ability to learn something new. Measured by special education teachers who interact with these students daily, we have seen dramatic changes in students' employability, a very tangible and important outcome! General education students who serve as peer mentors develop an increased sense of social responsibility as they learn to work with, protect, and advocate for their often marginalized peers. Life goals and college majors are shifting from this experience as they become better, more compassionate, more aware adults, with the strength and experience to actively engage in their communities.

GOAL

Our goal is to support individual music and special education teachers in creating their own United Sound ensembles through training, support, and organizational resources so that all children have access to meaningful and authentic music education and musical experiences. Our intended outcomes for students with disabilities include documented increase in the following areas: collaborative and teamwork skills, positive school and community engagement, positive social and interpersonal skills, positive self-image and self-concept, greater ability to regulate and improve emotional state, and heightened emotional self awareness. Outcomes for general education students who serve as peer mentors include documented increase in the following: collaboration and teamwork skills,

leadership and mentorship skills, positive school and community engagement, positive social and interpersonal skills, positive self-concept, awareness and respect for diversity, a broadened sense of contribution for the common good, and increased empathy. The intended outcome for educators is to better equip them to develop and expand a classroom culture of inclusivity, hospitality, and invitation.

We use music and performance goals to achieve non-musical outcomes, ultimately empowering youth to better succeed in their environment, in and outside of United Sound.

EVALUATION

We have worked with both music and special education teachers in the field to create learning assessments of New Musicians which enable us to measure and track their musical progress in line with national standards. This ensures that our methods, curriculum, and pedagogy are effective. United Sound teachers assess each New Musician at the beginning, mid-point, and end of each school year. These assessments are used to gauge the effectiveness of the program and curriculum and changes are made each year based on those assessments.

In addition to these assessments, administered by state-certified teachers, we also currently survey Peer Mentors, parents, and teachers each year to gauge their satisfaction with United Sound and the United Sound experience. Prior results of these surveys have been the catalyst for the creation of additional method/curriculum books and changes to our structure and processes.

IMPACT

United Sound makes a meaningful impact for society's most marginalized population: people with disabilities. Research shows an extremely high rate of depression among young people with mild to moderate intellectual disabilities because ostracism has a far greater negative impact on mental health than bullying. Ostracism is social exclusion where the person is completely ignored and has the effect of making a person feel like they simply do not exist. In a school setting, well-meaning students who would never intentionally bully often ostracize students with disabilities because they simply do not know how to engage or interact. This is why United Sound works. We like to call the instrument between them the "bridge to friendship." At the start, the students don't need to worry about having nothing to talk about because they have something to do, and something that they are all genuinely interested in. Within days, they are laughing and sharing all things non-musical as well. "High income" students with disabilities are no less ostracized than their low income peers, and in many circumstances, more so. It is for this reason that we seek to serve as many young people with disabilities and their service-minded peers as possible, regardless of race or income. Still, over 40% of our schools qualify for Title One funding and an additional 25% of our schools fall into the "middle income" category because seeking to serve teachers in a wide variety of educational settings is an important part of our vision.