

Inside Philanthropy

Why “Amp Up NYC” May Kickstart a Resurgence in Public School Music Education

Mike Scutari // Monday, July 21, 2014

Berklee College of Music and Little Kids Rock, an organization that trains public school teachers and supports pop/rock-based music education classes, have partnered with the New York City Department of Education to expand the district’s Modern Band music program to an additional 60,000 students in 600 city schools. You read that right: 60,000 students in 600 city schools. If the news sounds, well, historic, that’s because it is. The \$10 million initiative, dubbed “Amp Up NYC,” is the largest single private investment in a city’s public school music education in the history of the United States.

That said, this announcement shouldn’t come as a complete surprise, given the players involved. The Berklee College of Music, recently profiled for their efforts to strengthen research into the educational value of childhood music education, is the community-service branch of the esteemed college with after-school classrooms at 45 sites across the country. The Verona, New Jersey-based Little Kids Rock, meanwhile, serves more than 1,000 schools in 25 of the nation’s largest public school districts. These folks know what they’re doing.

Here’s how the initiative will work. Berklee College of Music and Little Kids Rock will contribute teacher training, the Modern Band curriculum, and thousands of new musical instruments to participating schools. Each of these elements, while seemingly innocuous, are in fact, quite important. Take teacher training, for example. Sure, we all love “School of Rock,” but not every teacher has that innate Jack Black magic. Others may never have even heard of “Stairway to Heaven.” And most, we can convincingly argue, never taught eight-year olds how to play a Ramones song.

The same logic applies to the initiative’s Modern Band curriculum. Tell a school to whip up a rock/pop curriculum and most administrators, quite understandably, wouldn’t know where to begin. But the curriculum is more than just pop and rock music. As noted in the Berklee School of Music press release, “Modern Band music programs teach the music of the past 50 years, from rock and reggae to Latin and R&B, among other genres. They complement existing programs such as jazz, marching band, and orchestral music.” The bottom line is that Amp Up NYC provides teachers with the tools they need to engage students.



Students performing at the Amp Up NYC launch event (Photo by Mike Coppola/Getty Images)

And don’t underestimate the importance of Amp Up NYC providing schools with thousands of new musical instruments. After all, most public schools desperately need new instruments, but they also need dozens of other things, and — let’s be honest — musical instruments rank low on the funding totem pole. So when new instruments are donated to a school — in this case, Taylor Guitars will contribute electric guitars to participating schools — administrators can happily avoid the messy and oftentimes politicized discussions that arise should they try to buy them on their own.

The program is already live in more than 70 classrooms, and what’s perhaps most exciting about it is the fact that by providing the basic ingredients to successfully engage students — training, curriculum, and equipment — Amp Up NYC’s music education model can be replicated almost anywhere.