

**ETM: The Podcast**  
**Episode 18: Community Voices**  
**TRANSCRIPT**

**Darren:** When I play the trombone it feels like I'm in the zone and I don't have to worry about anything.

**Grayson:** When I play percussion it makes me happy and I get to hit and I feel happy because our teacher is such a good teacher in teaching us music and playing songs.

**Ms. Ratjen:** I have the most fabulous music teacher out there. So that's number one. Our Ms. Parr goes above and beyond and she has such an excitement and passion for what she's doing. You can tell that not only does she love music, but she loves bringing music to life in our students. And the students love her, and she's been in our building only this year. So it's been nine and a half months that she's been here and I can't imagine this building without her.

**Noah:** You are listening to Education Through Music: The Podcast. As always I'm your host, Noah, and in this episode I am going to take you to PS72 in Throgs Neck, where the entire school community is abuzz with preparations for the band's spring concert. We'll hear from Darren, Amelia and Grayson, all of whom are fourth grade instrumentalists in the band, as well as their parents, their teacher, Ms. Parr, and their principal, Ms. Ratjen, whom we've already heard from in the cold open. We'll return now to Ms. Parr and their principal, Ms. Ratjen, whom we've already heard from in the cold open. We'll return now to Ms. Ratjen, who does a really good job of explaining the origin of the band and the impact it has had broadly on the school and the neighborhood.

**Ms. Ratjen:** This year's band program is something far beyond anything we could have imagined and, in all honesty, I am not coming, even though I'm coming with 30 years of experience as an educator. I'm not coming from any school that had a functioning band, so I'm coming to it new to the table, not knowing what to expect, not knowing how to make it happen. And luckily, this year, through the partnership with ETM, I've had great mentors, great advice, great support and we were able to develop this band program that exceeded our imagination. We have over 80 children who had never played an instrument before, who can now play songs from memory and just truly knock your socks off.

**Noah:** I'm really excited to hear them play later. Today is concert day. What is, what's the atmosphere like on concert day?

**Ms. Ratjen:** We have a buzz not just on concert day, we have a buzz on all the days leading up to concert day. We know that our children will just inspire and shock and surprise in all positive ways everybody who hears them. Because again, our students didn't know how to play instruments so people are coming expecting to hear squeaky instruments, bad tones I don't know if I'm using all the right musical words or not but just hearing a bit of a jumbled mess on stage and what they hear is music that just captivates the soul, invigorates the mind, gets

people wanting to get up and move and clap and just celebrate along with the children. So we have excitement, and it's not just excitement for the kids in the band. Their parents come to the school in the morning to drop them off with an excitement. The teachers and the paraprofessionals go walking around the building with that excitement—what time is it starting, what's happening, what songs are they doing? And that excitement is just absolutely infectious.

**Noah:** Have you noticed any positive benefits that have resulted from the students having access to learning of instruments and that sort of thing?

**Ms. Ratjen:** Absolutely so. There is the simple one where we noticed that there was a greater improvement in attendance among band students than non-band students.

**Noah:** Oh, wow.

**Ms. Ratjen:** So that was very important for us because we were a school that was typically at the bottom of the district in terms of attendance, and while we've moved up considerably, you know, we look at the data and we can see that band students have shown greater improvement in attendance and we think that's because they're excited to come to school and to play their instruments. We also noticed an increase in students' confidence. Not every student is successful academically, but every single student has a strength, a talent, an interest, a passion, and it's our job to find that. And I think through band we found that in a lot of students who might not have otherwise had a reason to celebrate or feel special or to feel that they have something to offer. Our band is open to all fourth and fifth graders, so we have multilingual learners in the band, we have students with special needs in the band and then we have gifted and talented students in the band. But we truly have every kind of student who we serve in that band and the beauty there is that each and every one of them has found a strength and a passion. The other thing that I'd like to add is I'm a community girl, so this is my neighborhood, and so the effect of the band even reaches outside of the school. Because as I'm walking in the neighborhood, walking up on East Tremont, walking home at the end of the day, I bump into my neighbors and I can't tell you how many of my neighbors say, oh my goodness, I see the kids walking to school with their instruments and they see them wheeling their percussions or they see them carrying the cases, and even the neighborhood, many of whom don't even have students who go to the school anymore, because a lot of the neighbors are older people whose children have moved away. But even they're excited now about something new that's happening at PS72.

**Noah:** Principal Ratjen, thanks so much for taking the time to tell me about your music program.

**Ms. Ratjen:** Well, thank you so much for showcasing our music program, and there's more to come.

**Noah:** We have Amelia Darren and Grayson and I'm Noah, and we're talking about a concert that we're getting ready to play today. How are we feeling about the concert?

**Amelia:** I'm nervous.

**Noah:** A little nervous. Okay, why nervous?

**Amelia:** Because my dad's going to be there.

**Noah:** Ah, okay, and you want to play really well because your dad's going to be there.

**Amelia:** Yeah

**Noah:** That makes sense, these things that are really important to us. Sometimes the nerves tell us that they're important to us. So the nerves can be a good thing sometimes. But, darren, we were talking earlier and you said that you're not nervous. Tell me about that.

**Darren:** Even though I mess up, I can still try again. Either way, like I don't want to restart and have to restart and everybody's playing a whole entire different part and I'm on number one. Even though I mess up, I still can try.

**Noah:** Well, yeah, trying is the most important part, right? If we don't try stuff, especially stuff that's really difficult, then we never get better at stuff, especially the stuff that is important to us and the stuff that might make us nervous. Okay, so, Grayson, tell me about how you're feeling.

**Grayson:** Well, I'm feeling nervous because I might hit the wrong note or I might play too fast or might get ahead or be too behind and if I get it on, I feel proud of myself and I feel more encouraged and that makes me feel better and my mom's going to be in the crowd.

**Noah:** Oh yeah, so a common theme here of wanting to play really well because our parents and loved ones are in the audience At the start of the year. What was it like to go to music class?

**Amelia:** So the first day of band I was really excited to start playing a new instrument because I already knew how to play the keyboard.

**Noah:** Okay, and so was this year the year that you started playing baritone. Cool, and so what has it been like going from not knowing how to play the baritone, even though you played some keyboard, to now getting ready to put on a concert on baritone?

**Amelia:** I'm feeling like okay with that, because we've done concerts in the past and I haven't like messed up in the past so I'm so I feel kind of okay with this concert.

**Noah:** Great. What about you, Darren?

**Darren:** Like there was this other kid. I'm not gonna say his name, but this other kid was we were just starting and I was like he was louder than me. He was like he wasn't better, but he was just louder and I was like, oh, he's gonna beat me into. Like I used to be competitive,

competitive. So I used to be, oh, he's gonna beat me, what do I do, what do I do? But then I started actually practicing and like band for me, when I was back, I was like this, maybe I want to quit. But then after like seeing something, I don't know what happened, but I just keep, I kept playing and I kept trying and I actually like playing the trombone now.

**Noah:** Great. What is it like for you as a percussionist, uh, going to music class knowing that you're going to be responsible for kind of keeping the beat, keeping everybody on track? Grace.

**Grayson:** Well, it's because I'm used to it. But from the beginning of the school year I was like I got this because I also played the keyboard, like Amelia said, and I felt confident because there's a xylophone which is considered after percussion. I knew I wasn't going to screw up the xylophone.

**Noah:** Oh yeah, because it's shaped like a keyboard, right yeah?

**Grayson:** and it has the same notes.

**Noah:** Yeah.

**Grayson:** And bass drum and snare drum are keeping beats, but our music teacher, Ms Parr, is amazing at telling us and directing us in the right direction to keeping the notes. So I feel sometimes nervous, but then I feel confident.

**Noah:** Okay, so this is a question for everybody, and feel free to chime in whoever has a good answer ready to go. What has it been like working with Ms. Parr this year?

**Amelia:** So basically, at the start of the year I had this person I'm not going to say names, but I had this person that I that I had problems with right and the teacher before Ms. Parr didn't really help with that, but Ms. Parr, she like, she like separated us and then I started liking music better.

**Noah:** Okay, so sometimes you have conflict in the music room, but Ms. Parr is really good at helping you navigate the conflict. That's great.

**Darren:** Well me Well. First I was like, should I really play in band? And I started playing in band because Ms. Parr helped me on reading notes, playing the trombone from scratch, which I was horrible at. I sounded like, let's say, a mouse squeaking, like a knocked out rat squeaking for help. Anyways, even in music, like in music class, like the regular one, I was doing so good, like I was a role in like a pirate act. I was in band, I was doing good, and that kind of helped me boost my grades too.

**Noah:** Hmm. tell me more about that.

**Darren:** Like as soon as I started playing trombone and doing all this stuff, I felt like I finally could do something, because in the class I was like, just raising my hand, I was like don't pick on me, teacher. I was like now I'm like this is nine plus nine. No, nine times nine. This is easy. After that I kind of feel boosted in my confidence and abilities, and it's not just in school, it's also outside my school area.

**Noah:** Okay, so both in school and out of school, it sounds like you're gaining some confidence as a result of playing. That's great. Any other last question Are there any other things that you would say are really special about music class, about coming to music class?

**Darren:** Coming to music class makes me feel like not just I can do anything and I'm confident I've been yapping about that but I also like it's like I can, like I feel in the zone, because my dad introduced me to music. I was listening to it 24-7. And I feel like I'm in the zone. I can listen to music whenever I want. I don't have to worry about anything or anyone. And it's just pretty good

**Grayson:** Ms.Parr is such a great teacher. She teaches everyone in this band with such great enthusiasm and she's great and she teaches really well. Instead of saying play this or this is the key and I'll play a whole entire song, she's like this is this key, this is this key. And she gets music sheets and sometimes she manually writes 'Me' or 'Doh' or 'Ray', and that helps us. She guides us along to playing.

**Darren:** I have to agree with Grayson on this one here, because not only does she do that, but she also doesn't say like, basically like oh, you don't know how to do this, I'll give up on you. She keeps trying, like and trying and trying until we actually get it.

**Amelia:** So I'm gonna add on to what Darren and Grayson was saying. So, Ms. Parr right, unlike my other, unlike other teachers who just say, do this for the first time and then just expect us to get it, just get it just straight away when some people need more help than other people and some teachers don't, just don't get that. Well, Ms. Parr right, even though some kids get it, she still explains it in a way that everyone could understand it.

**Noah:** And teaching so that anybody can play. That's great. Well, thank you so much for talking to me today.

**Amelia:** You're welcome.

**Darren:** You're welcome.

**Noah:** All right, great, so we'll cut there. Thank you again. Thank you. Now we turn to the parents of Amelia, Grayson and Darren to hear their perspectives on the band program at PS72. What is it like having your children, take part in band at PS72?

**Grayson's Mother:** I personally think it is such an amazing experience. She's always had a love for music and she was transitioning from another school into the fourth grade, so that

already was nerve wracking. But then coming into the fourth grade and finding out that there was going to be a brand new band and I knew of her love of music I'm like that's a perfect way for her to transition from a different school into a new school and make friends and do something she loves and it's just been like I'm really, really grateful for the opportunity for her.

Noah: Yeah, it's such great timing for the band to be starting up from scratch.

**Grayson's Mother:** Absolutely, yeah.

**Darren's Mother:** Well, for me it's so exciting because his father tried to get him into every sport there is and he has no interest. So when music came along, he's so in love with it and I'm excited that it's just something that he enjoys doing.

**Amelia's Father:** For Amelia, we tried to get her into a couple of different instruments like piano, and asked her if she wanted to play the violin and she said no. She did the piano once and she said, eh, I think I'm done. But as soon as she got into PS72, she was like, oh, we sold her a band and she said that she wanted to play the baritone because it's the biggest instrument they have right now. So I was like you know what, just it's fine, go for it. So you know, great experience and she really enjoys it.

**Noah:** The choice aspect I think is really important, especially in fourth grade, fifth grade, when kids are starting to develop their own preferences, their own personalities. It's so cool that there's a program where the expectation is not one size fits all, because then everybody will be playing the same instrument. The expectation is that you get to kind of branch out and do your own thing.

**Grayson's Mother:** I especially feel that way for Grayson, because with percussion she's not limited to just. She started out with xylophone because she already played keyboard and piano, but she'd only done that for a year. So I was like you know. She said I want to go for percussion because the xylophone, the keys are similar to piano. But having been in percussion, she's able now to play the snare drum, the bass drum, crash cymbals, several different percussion instruments, and that's perfect for her because she's always wanted to try different instruments. So when we were doing piano she's like I also want to do violin and I also want to do drums. So joining the band, like everything, the timing was just perfect and the fact that she got selected for the percussion section was just perfect for her too. So, yeah, beyond thrilled and it's perfect. Yeah, it was a perfect experience.

**Noah:** Have you noticed anything in particular when they come home from school? What are they talking about? Is band part of what they're talking about, and what's that like?

**Darren's Mother:** At home. I want to say the first couple of weeks was hard on my head. Um, however he sounds, he's so focused, he sounds amazing and music has given him such a focus that this year it's like a 360 from last year, like he's on the honor roll every semester, like he's so

focused. He was falling back in math and everything and because I don't know what goes on in music, but he's so focused and he's academically, everything has changed.

**Noah:** Having seen your children's development over the course of this one year, has their participation in band gotten you thinking any different way about what's to come with middle schools?

**Amelia's Father:** Well, for that question, not really, the only reason I say that is because with band, and she said she's going to do it next year and she said she's going to change instruments. So now, since she told me that, I have a feeling that for now, on fourth grade, one instrument, fifth grade, another one. Sixth, seventh, eighth, it's going to be a different instrument every year. So you know, I just expect that progression and with the middle school process it makes me want to look at schools that does have band a part of it, and if you don't have a band you might have to be left off the list, you know.

**Darren's Mother:** So I'm kind of disappointed because it's the last year with Ms. Parr and I think she's an amazing teacher. However, they don't have violin here, so this is the opening. He wants to play the violin, so his thing is that over the summer, I'm going to learn how to play the violin. Ms. Parr doesn't teach violin, so he wants to do that so he can come back and be the only violinist here, and as far as even if his junior high school doesn't have band, I will make sure I do online classes or something to keep him focused on his music.

**Grayson's Mother:** That's a great ambition to want to be the only violinist in a marching band, I love that idea.

**Noah:** I think that really completes the, I'm learning so much about Darren. Right, I'm really getting a picture of a student, a child, who has really come out of his shell and that is a huge ambition, to sort of self-study or to to pick up the violin.

**Grayson's Mother:** That's um, that's not easy I'm a little concerned, um, because of course the music programs are not offered in all schools and, um, academics is important as well, so it's hard to find a program that's well-rounded with the academics, that will challenge her she's in the GMT program here and also offer a music program, which she loves music. So I was already doing the piano outside of the marching band, but she loves the band over the piano. So it's like that's going to be a hard obstacle to navigate there, because she's got one more year here with Ms. Parr and then we just have to see what happens after that. I would hope that the middle school that she goes to offer her music program. That would be amazing. I wish all schools offered a music program for them. I mean shown to build their confidence, affect their academics in positive ways. So just, one can only hope.

**Noah:** Finally, here is Jess Parr, the band teacher at PS72. Jess, thanks for talking to me today yeah, no problem, thanks for being here of course. I just watched a fantastic band concert here at PS72 and I am sort of in awe of the fact that you've only been here for a year. So I'm

wondering how has it been getting here, getting started with the band program, and how did you come so far so quickly?

**Jess Parr:** Yeah, I mean, I never know what to expect, especially when you're starting a new program or bringing a program back in a new school. And it was kind of like you're either going to sink or swim. But you know, someone told me one time a very important mentor of mine was like you can only roll out a program one time, so you gotta make it work. And you know, I've been at three different schools and had the same outcome every time. And I was at my first school for a long time and I was terrified to leave because we built such an amazing school community through the band program and had an amazing administration and they were very supportive and we saw what the community, what the band program and music did to bring the parents and community in. You know we had packed auditoriums. So when I left there I was really afraid and someone told me well, if you did this here, you can build it again. I was like I don't know. So then when I taught in the second school, I was there for two years. The second year I rolled out the band program and when we did this concert under the star series there it was the same thing that the outpouring of the community just came out and you know they loved it and they loved being around everybody and the kids were happy to have them there and it really shows the kids that you know you've got this, you know backup here, you know your community's out there to support you, which is important especially in a school like this. So when I came here to a school that has had music for a long time, but it's, it was strong, and then it wasn't so strong, it was strong, wasn't so strong and I know it went through a couple crazy years with COVID and it kind of took away the band program. So I was really excited to rebuild the band program here. But coming into a brand new school, I was really worried. Nobody knew who I was, um, and here I was going to try to do a band program with a bunch of strangers. How were they going to buy into this?

**Noah:** as an unknown quantity.

**Jess Parr:** Yeah and yeah they're like well, what is a band program? Because the last time that there was a band here, I think these current kids were in first grade, maybe second grade, and so they didn't really have anything to pull from like, hey, what is a band program? And who is this person? And you know they didn't, how were they to trust me? And they're gonna pay for these instruments when they don't know who I am? And so there was this big like what am I going to do if this doesn't work? So, and then I think I waited a couple of weeks and pulled out the most fun activities I could think of in music class to get that buy-in from the kids immediately. And so, once they were excited, I pulled out all the instruments and put them all the way across the front of the room. I'm like you guys want to play one of these. This year we're starting the band program back up again, and they just showed up. We had our band meeting and you know I was new to the principal also, and so she's like well, I don't know, maybe we'll get 30. And I think you know we ended up with over 100 this year to start out the program, and I was amazed and the buy in from the parents and the constant support, and you know the words of encouragement you're doing a great job and the kids are sounding great. And you know, it was just. It just surprised me, and even more so, things I sent home and how responsive they were, because it's something that I was told when I was going to start this program say, well, you



know, you'll be lucky if you get 40. I'm like, well, 40 is not what I want. You know, I've always had these big groups and you know, when you have a big group, it's not just about teaching the music, it's about, you know, hey, look, you're performing with all these kids and you make a mistake. They got your back. You know, you're part of a group, you're part of something bigger. So teaching the band program is, you know, look at this, let's show them this huge group and we're going to go to this nursing home and we're going to go to this parade and we're going to support our school and all these functions and you're, these role models for people. And you know, and they just bought into it. You know, I mean it wasn't all peaches and cream at these rehearsals, but the other thing is the hard work aspect and the parents support constantly there. You know, got every parent's cell phone number. They text me constantly and you know, just, the communication was great and I think that building a program like this really shows the parents that you're not only invested in their child, but that, hey, look at all these parents that I didn't know your kid was my class, I didn't know your were in the same class. And they meet other parents and I think they feel better about the school that way because they see how much support there is and they know that they're not alone. Say, ok, our kid's going off to middle school, well, I bet somebody here is going to be in that same school. So it's just that your community's got your back type of thing, especially in a school like this where many of the kids live right in this neighborhood. You know you walk to school and you see somebody walking by themselves hey, you can come walk with us, you know it's just to see everybody all the time. You know I have kids talking with other kids that weren't friends before the band program and now their parents are friends and it's just great. You know, it's one of my favorite things about the band program is the community aspect of it.

**Noah:** Yeah, it seems like it's sort of a, It's kind of like a fire starter, but then the fire builds on its own once you get it started, the band is a means by which, like community is a big part of it and then parents, in getting their their, in their child getting involved in the band, they end up building community with other parents. And um and it's also like a window into the school and that, like at that concert that I just saw, how often are that many parents going to be out of school?

**Jess Parr:** Yeah, and sitting on the ground on blankets eating popcorn together, like you know just like it's amazing to see and just you know, laughing at inside jokes because they've been there through that whole process and they were there when they didn't sound so great and they were there when, you know, they didn't know how to open up their case. And you know, parents are talking to parents. Be like, oh, my kid's going to play the flute, your kid's going to play the clarinet. You said something that reminded me and you know, when people say, wait, so this is a public school, I feel like they say, well, you can't have that kind of program in a public school. But it's parents, kids and families are the same everywhere. Parents love their kids. Parents are going to do what they can to support and I feel like when they see other parents doing that as well, it just makes it all that stronger. It makes it just, you know, a strong community. Just, you know, when you have this many people showing up and you've got a group of five kids and you've got all these parents showing up for it, or just any event, you got the PTA coming out and sponsoring things, you got the councilwoman coming out, you got the Bronx World President, and there's that and people want to be part of something that is important, or just be part of something bigger than themselves.

**Noah:** The parts in a lot of these pieces that the kids were playing, especially the stuff that they've been working on since the very beginning. Each of those parts by itself, not that exciting, but you put the whole band together and it's really incredible. It's really exciting and intricate music for, especially for, elementary school.

**Jess Parr:** A parent said that exact thing actually. They're like you know, I was listening to them practice at home and I was like what is this concert going to be like? But when they all get together they sound pretty good. So it's, you know power in numbers and just, you know you play, you're stronger when you know someone's next to you doing the same thing and going through, and you know, same thing with the parents. I feel like they're more confident and, yeah, I'm going to show up because I know this person's going to show up and I'm not going to be the only one sitting on a blanket eating popcorn by myself. So it was like one person does it and it's kind of like you just need that sole group of, like you said, start and fire like that little flame to start something and then it'll just grow.

**Noah:** Jess, thanks so much for talking.

**Jess Parr:** Yeah, thank you. Yeah, it's great.

**Noah:** That about does it for this special behind-the-scenes look at the band concert at PS72. If you haven't done so already, be sure to subscribe to the show wherever you're doing your listening, and leave us a five-star rating and or a review. For more on Education Through Music, check out [ETMonline.org](http://ETMonline.org). Thanks so much for listening, and now to play us out, a few more selections from the PS72 band concert.