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Sing a song of Texas

By Karen Adler
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Crystal DeLuccio, 17, trudges through her morning classes.

But by the time seventh period arrives at 2:30 p.m., her eyes are bright as her voice fills the ensemble room with song.

"This is what keeps me going," said the junior at Edgewood Fine Arts Academy on the West Side. "Singing is my life. Without that, I pretty much don't have nothing to lean back on."

Former Dallas advertising executive Bruce Orr had students like Crystal on his mind when he co-founded the Texas Music Project, a nonprofit group working to strengthen and restore music education in schools across the state.

A compact disc featuring 21 artists with ties to the Lone Star State is the group's first fund-raising effort. "Don't Mess with Texas Music" went on sale earlier this month and already is the top-selling compilation of Texas artists in history, Orr said.

"It was, I think, the coming together of a really important need that really hadn't been ... addressed openly or publicly," he said.

Revenues from the sales of the CD will be turned over to the Texas Commission on the Arts, which will distribute grants to teachers to buy, among other needs, equipment, instruments and music. Orr hopes to raise \$500,000 over the next year, he said.



Edgewood Fine Arts Academy student Kimberly Brown, 15, (center) sings during a music class. A private group is helping to fund music classes.
Jerry Lara/Express-News

How you can help

CD: Don't Mess with Texas Music

Artists: Willie Nelson, Stevie Ray Vaughan, Marcia Ball, Erykah Badu, Clint Black, Patricia Vonne, Dixie Chicks and more

Retail price: \$14.95

Buy it at: Retail stores, Starbucks and www.texasmusicproject.org

Supports: Texas Music Project

Between a shortfall in funding and the pressure of state standardized tests, music education has taken a back seat, said Robert Floyd, executive director of the Texas Music Educators Association.

While reading, writing and math are all important, "it's a narrow vision of what we really want to do for our children in Texas," Floyd said.

And besides, research has shown students of fine arts outperform their peers on aptitude tests, said Floyd, also chairman of the Texas Coalition for Quality Arts Education.

"There's no better tool to help students increase self-esteem ... and learn about other cultures," he said.

School districts aren't cutting music programs altogether, but they are slashing personnel and not offering music classes to students until the later grades, Floyd said.

It's a song and dance Lawrence Smith knows well. The music teacher for the Edgewood School District divides his time between the Fine Arts Academy and Kennedy High School. Only some of the elementary schools have a certified music teacher.

"The arts are the last thing that's going to be funded," he said. "The new thing is No Child Left Behind. That's the mandate nationally."

Even at the Fine Arts Academy — a school dedicated to students interested in the arts — money for sheet music and instruments is limited, Smith said.

"Any money would be a help," he said.

The Texas Music Project is the first statewide initiative to raise awareness about the importance of music education, Floyd said.

Participants on the CD include Willie Nelson, Stevie Ray Vaughn, Ruthie Foster and Erykah Badu. Their songs — country, rock, blues and soul — cover the gamut of Texas music.

"The eclectic mix is great," said Patricia Vonne, a San Antonio native who claims the only Spanish song in the compilation. "It makes me proud to be a Texan."

Vonne said she was lucky she had access to full music education at St. Anthony's Elementary School.

"It was an escape for me and it really was a salvation," she said. "It's unfortunate that the powers that be don't think music is a priority."

Locally, the CDs are available at Starbucks and retail music stores and also can be purchased at www.texasmusicproject.org.

<http://news.mysanantonio.com/story.cfm?xla=saen&xlb=710&xlc=1059667>