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El Sistema, the Community Opus Project, and School Reform in the Chula Vista Elementary School District, San Diego, California

Victoria Plettner-Saunders

Marco Sanchez was in the third grade in 2010 when the San Diego Youth Symphony and Conservatory (SDYS) launched the Community Opus Project in Chula Vista Elementary School District (CVESD). Participating in the after-school El Sistema-inspired music program, Marco went home from his Community Opus sessions two days a week and taught his younger brother Rodrigo what he was learning in class. This was not unusual for a Community Opus student, who has been immersed in a program that encourages peer teaching as a cornerstone of its pedagogy. Every musician has something he or she can teach a fellow musician. Mrs. Sanchez grew excited about her boys' re-creation of music class at home and proud of Marco teaching his brother. To encourage their efforts, she bought them a used keyboard at the local swap meet. Before the end of the school year, in an unusual turn of events, an opening came up in Community Opus, and Rodrigo was invited to participate a year earlier than his peers because he already knew the music. Marco played the viola, and when Rodrigo was asked which instrument he wanted to play, Marco suggested he play the violin so they could play duets together.

This anecdote exemplifies the many stories of transformation that are the result of SDYS's Community Opus Project after-school program, the most astounding of which is how SDYS, through Community Opus, facilitated the reinstatement of in-school music in the school district after fifteen years without it.

The loss of music and arts education programs in the schools during the past two generations is well documented. Through the years, countless nonprofit arts organizations have tried to fill the gap with their own programs. We have witnessed the work and heard the collective voice of art education advocates at school board meetings and in op-ed pieces. The League of American Orchestras drafted its Statement of Common Cause: Orchestras Support In-School Music Education, signed by more than 250 member orchestras, to rally "a collective opportunity for all orchestras to take individual, community-specific action to improve access

to music education in schools nationwide." But for all the advocacy efforts and sign waving, we seem to have made little significant headway to return music or any arts education to the school day. So, as word gets out about SDYS's seemingly unbelievable results in Chula Vista, it is no wonder that funders, advocates, arts educators, and school administrators all want to know what is in SDYS's secret sauce.

Challenging Fundamental Assumptions

In this country, we tend to think of "deep" and "broad" as two mutually exclusive ways to approach arts learning. In El Sistema, they co-exist.

— Eric Booth (quoted by Tricia Tunstall in *Changing Lives*)

The loss of music and arts education programs in the schools during the past two generations is well documented. Through the years, countless nonprofit arts organizations have tried to fill the gap with their own programs. But for all the advocacy efforts and sign waving, we seem to have made little significant headway to return music or any arts education to the school day.

The "secret" is a deep commitment to the principles of El Sistema and their unique application to every aspect of SDYS's engagement with the CVESD. The philosophies of El Sistema can be credited for shaping how the SDYS's board approached its efforts to refocus the

organization from a traditional youth orchestra to one that embraced a community-focused vision to bring music to all. These philosophies also guided how they went about their work with the CVESD to facilitate change, which in only four years includes a commitment to reinstate music education district-wide after a fifteen-year absence. El Sistema-inspired teaching methods helped participating children become better, more engaged students, brought families closer, and encouraged parents to bond with one another, thereby creating effective advocates for music in the schools. Finally, interviews with funders, school officials, board members, and advocacy experts confirm that district-wide systemic change in music education in the CVESD could not have happened as it did without SDYS and the Community Opus Project. Creating and sustaining Opus required not only a vision and a plan but also the ability to move past assumptions about the role of an arts organization in the delivery of in-school programs to a deeply integrated philosophy of community responsibility.

To understand "El Sistema-inspired" fully, we must start in Venezuela. As the story goes, in 1975 José Antonio Abreu started what became El Sistema with eleven students in a garage in Venezuela and a vision that one day these and many others would play in the finest concert halls in the world. Today, El Sistema is a global movement with its most visible success story that of Los Angeles Philharmonic conductor Gustavo Dudamel. While El Sistema-inspired programs around the globe differ as much from the Venezuelan model as from one another, Eric Booth in his essay "Five Encounters with El Sistema International" asserts that what they share is what is at the core of the El Sistema movement:

a vision and a set of fundamental principles.¹ Those can best be described in this definition from Booth's essay "The Fundamentals of El Sistema": "El Sistema is . . . a set of inspiring ideals [that] informs an intensive youth music program that seeks to effect social change through the ambitious pursuit of musical excellence. El Sistema focuses primarily on children with the fewest resources and greatest need."²

Practically speaking, El Sistema is intensive ensemble work with accomplished musicians, personal encouragement and support for each child, the "each one teach one" philosophy, and ensuring many opportunities to perform as part of the learning process and for maintaining the ensemble.³ In time, Abreu observed that children were changed by their experience: "Not only would the young musician grow in spirit, confidence, and the capacity for self-discipline . . . [the] family would be energized by pride and the determination to support him. So, family ties were actually strengthened. The orchestra was actually a model of community, because it taught solidarity and self-discipline."⁴

Abreu called El Sistema a youth development movement to clearly align it with the government's fight against poverty rather than have it portrayed as "a transmitter of elite culture."⁵ Acknowledging the outcomes Abreu sought to achieve beyond impressive orchestral music by young people, Booth asserts that El Sistema is in fact a "social change movement designed to disrupt traditional notions of youth development programs and to embrace the notion of our collective responsibility for raising the next generation." He further observes that what El Sistema offers other communities is "not a blueprint but an inquiry into the most effective ways to achieve youth development goals through an intensive investment in ensemble music." Thus, as we see in Chula Vista, it is "infinitely adaptable to very different circumstances and environments."

SDYS and Its Partner

The Community Opus Project is arguably one of the best examples of Booth's assertions. SDYS's president and CEO Dalouge Smith and SDYS's board have made an intensive investment in ensemble music to achieve an audacious goal: education reform through music education. In effect they "disrupted the status quo" at the CVESD. With dozens of education reform efforts in districts nationwide being tested regularly with dismal outcomes, understanding what made this situation different begs inquiry.

Founded in 1945, SDYS has given thousands of young musicians the opportunity to study and perform classical

repertoire at a highly advanced level. It is one of the oldest continuously operating youth orchestras in the United States and the resident youth orchestra of San Diego's historic Balboa Park. SDYS's mission is to "instill excellence in the musical and personal development of students through rigorous and inspiring musical experiences." The orchestra's core programming provides training and performance opportunities for more than six hundred students each year, who participate in eleven orchestral and wind ensembles at the advanced, intermediate, and introductory levels. In addition SDYS offers chamber music, group lessons, and soloist competitions.

Exploring a Means for Increasing Inclusivity

Like many music education organizations, SDYS experienced increases in student participation as music education programs in the schools decreased in the 1990s. In

the new millennium they became aware that although their attendance was increasing, student diversity was decreasing. This was in part because of affluent parents who valued the benefits of extracurricular music instruction for their children and could afford to make the commitment that participation in a youth symphony required. Reaching more diverse groups of students with lower socioeconomic demographics required greater outreach efforts than had previously been facilitated by partnerships with music programs in public schools. Unfortunately, these less affluent schools were often the first to lose their music programs because of budget cuts and the increased pressure of improving test scores. As a result, they could no longer provide SDYS with connections to interested and musically prepared students.

As the board of directors became more aware of the impact that the loss of programs in schools was having on the youth orchestra, it began to seek ways to better serve the community at large. To do this, it sought vision and planning support using the resources available through membership in the League of American Orchestras. In 2008 they received a full scholarship from the league's Institutional Vision Program (IVP). This program provided capacity-building assistance through a three-year visioning, strategic planning, and implementation process. The IVP offered training for board members and the support of highly experienced consultants.

Meanwhile, Smith was already familiar with the El Sistema movement in the United States, as he had been participating in El Sistema meetings, forums, and learning sessions since 2006. He had even had opportunities to hear firsthand about El Sistema and its principles from Maestro Abreu and Gustavo Dudamel. Making the connection between the El Sistema philosophy of catalyzing systemic change through music and what they wanted to achieve in San Diego

County, Smith and SDYS's board and staff moved forward to develop the "inspired" program with the CVESD community.

The seventh largest city in Southern California, Chula Vista is about seven miles north of the US-Mexico border and seven miles south of downtown San Diego. The population is largely Hispanic/Latino, and 50 percent of the schools are Title I funded. The CVESD is the largest K–6 grade school district in California with forty-five schools and about 29,000 students. Many of the students are English language learners who do not speak English at home. The district's leadership believes

in the importance of whole-child education and has recently come out in support of the arts as a tool for addressing the Core Curriculum Standards. The CVESD was a willing partner for piloting the Community Opus Project. SDYS chose to begin in Chula Vista in

part because of the ease with which they were able to build a relationship with the district and the community at large.

By October 2010, SDYS announced their vision to "Make Music Education Accessible to All by 2020" and the launch of the Community Opus Project in Chula Vista. Like Abreu, they started small (with two schools) but maintained an aspirational focus on reintroducing in-school music to the entire district. Initially funded entirely by SDYS, the project served sixty-five third-graders in two schools with music instruction two days a week for ninety minutes per day and held a weeklong music camp during parent-teacher conference week. Within that first year, positive El Sistema-like changes in student behavior and attendance as well as parent engagement began to occur at these two schools. By June 2011, district leaders were so enthusiastic about the results they asked SDYS to expand the program to a total of six schools in year two (serving about two hundred students) and funded the expansion with district money.

Bringing Resources and Skills to the Table

El Sistema organizers like SDYS are always looking for ways to capitalize on or leverage opportunity. This happened in year three when the district contacted SDYS to ask them about providing music instruction as part of a US Department of Education Promise Neighborhoods grant proposal. SDYS said "yes," but only if the music they taught was in-school instead of after-school. The district agreed and extended the request to ask if SDYS would teach third-grade in-school music at the six schools currently with after-school programs. SDYS again obliged. This was a risky choice for SDYS because it was very sure it did not want to become the long-term in-school music instructor for the CVESD. However, it could see that the district wanted to begin

restoring school-day music but didn't have the capacity or experience to make this happen on its own.

The CVESD welcomed SDYS's help because without any credentialed music teachers, the district was unprepared to deliver the in-school music instruction it now wanted to provide. When SDYS accepted its roles in the Promise Neighborhoods and third-grade in-school music programs, it reminded district leaders that it would only fulfill these roles temporarily, as its goal was for the district to hire full-time certified music teachers. While these may not have

been traditional program choices for a youth orchestra, SDYS identified and used these district requests as opportunities to move closer to the audacious goal of in-school music for every child.

As the Community Opus Project progressed, Jaclyn Rudderow, program and communications manager

at VH1 Save The Music Foundation, became interested in SDYS's work in Chula Vista. She and Smith had stayed in contact over the years that SDYS was conceptualizing and creating the Community Opus Project. Smith was waiting for the right moment to introduce her to the district. VH1 Save The Music Foundation has a unique funding program in that they only underwrite the cost of musical instruments, the instruments can only be used during the school day, and the school district must have full-time music teachers on staff in order to receive a grant. When conversations between SDYS and the district turned to in-school instruction, Smith invited Rudderow to speak at a CVESD Board of Education meeting to share her funding program information with them. A meeting was then set up for district leadership, Rudderow, and Smith to talk about the ways in which VH1 Save The Music Foundation could support CVESD's efforts to build a new music program.

In an interview, Rudderow spoke of the importance of the role SDYS played in establishing and facilitating a productive relationship between the foundation and the district. She also noted that while other symphonies around the country are working with districts to provide music in the schools, SDYS's full investment is "a one-of-a-kind gem." SDYS's way of working is similar to the foundation's. They have shared values and a shared model of working with school districts. Together they were able to help the CVESD reach the point of making a district-wide commitment to in-school music instruction as well as hiring the full-time music teachers needed to make it happen. In return, the foundation is donating \$30,000 worth of new musical instruments to each school with a full-time music teacher and promises an ongoing relationship with the district until every school has a teacher and instruments as they progress toward their goal.⁶

Each step made toward achieving the goal of district-wide in-school music instruction required a full investment from both SDYS and the CVESD. Assistant Superintendent John Nelson maintains that at the core of their success was just this kind of collaboration: “There is a cultural fit between both organizations. In this partnership we appreciate one another — and are willing to sit at the table and listen. Often people on the receiving end put amazing demands on the benefactors. We want to pony up the support when we can and work together — we’re willing to do the work to make it possible.” In February 2014 (year four), Nelson announced, “Today is an exciting day for the district and community of Chula Vista. After many years of limited access to music education in our schools, we are embarking on reintroducing Visual and Performing Arts across our entire district over the next several years. Our district is making the commitment to lead San Diego County in restoring music and arts education for all students.”⁷

We All Know Something We Can Teach Someone Else

To fulfill the new commitment to district-wide music education, the CVESD again needed more help from SDYS. This time Lauren Widney, SDYS’s education and community program manager, stepped in. Widney has had extensive experience working with school districts as a credentialed teacher and former summer-school principal. She had built a significant amount of professional trust with district and school leaders throughout the system as she established the Community Opus Project after-school and also helped prepare classroom teachers for in-school music. In an unprecedented move, she agreed to temporarily step in as the CVESD’s visual and performing arts (VAPA) coordinator and assist them with creating the infrastructure for their new program and with hiring a permanent full-time VAPA coordinator.

Faster Than Anyone Could Have Imagined

Whatever is the community’s reality, is our reality.

— Dalouge Smith

In April 2014, SDYS is fully immersed in what is without a doubt one of the most successful education reform efforts taking place anywhere in San Diego County. The Community Opus Project’s measurable outcomes by the end of year four will include serving more than three thousand students receiving twice-weekly music instruction; better student performance in school; more parent engagement in their children’s education and as music advocates; stronger bonds

within and among families; a community youth orchestra; the diversification of SDYS’s core programs; and recognition from national funders including VH1 Save The Music Foundation, the League of American Orchestras/Getty Foundation, the NAMM Foundation, and the National Endowment for the Arts. CVESD is also now fully invested in reinstating music education district-wide with four full-time music teachers as well as three additional teachers and a VAPA coordinator slated to be hired next year. Furthermore, CVESD is completing its first-ever district-wide VAPA strategic plan with assistance from Arts Empower San Diego, a collaborative effort of the San Diego Foundation, the San Diego County Office of Education, The California Arts Project, and Young Audiences of San Diego.

Because Community Opus Project’s students show a new sense of responsibility to self and others, as well as demonstrating the value of working in teams and learning together, teachers and principals in

the CVESD are now asking the project’s staff how to apply their El Sistema–inspired teaching methods to their in-school curriculum. They want children to want to come to school every day and not just on “music days.” SDYS’s board president Robert Gaan said in a recent interview, “Where we are now in year four wasn’t supposed to happen until year seven. We thought we’d spend the first three years just doing after-school programs in two schools.” Widney notes that the program has grown “faster and in more directions than anyone could have ever imagined.” Smith asserts that this is very “consistent with the rapid growth experienced by El Sistema in Venezuela and the El Sistema–inspired programs that are part of the global movement.”

So how did SDYS go from a desire to be more community focused to becoming an education reformer? Prior to becoming CEO, Smith had extensive experience with arts advocacy through his leadership of the San Diego Regional Arts and Culture Coalition and his connections with the League of American Orchestras. As a music education advocate, he was able to make a connection between what an El Sistema–inspired program could do as an agent of change and what was necessary to convince a school district to put music back in the schools. No one else in the El Sistema movement has done anything like it, and most are completely unaware of what has really happened in Chula Vista because, as Booth asserts, “El Sistema lacks an effective learning community.” Furthermore, he says, “the work with Opus is hard for people to understand because how [Smith] has used the model is so different. The relationships are different than the expected norms of how they happen in the US.” Finally Booth maintains that Smith “is one of

the few — if one of the only — leaders in the El Sistema community who unabashedly says, ‘My program advocates for music education not just El Sistema programs.’” Likening his approach to the El Sistema concept of adapting to specific needs of the group, Smith cites “being responsive to the community’s realities as they exist” as being one of the factors in their success. He also suggests that El Sistema in Venezuela is a highly centralized organization. But in the United States this kind of centralization is impossible, and it has made it harder to create consistency here in terms of program design, outcomes, and even the development of replicable models nationwide. Heather Noonan, the League of American Orchestras’ vice president for advocacy, confirms this challenge. When asked what local communities can learn about music education advocacy from the Community Opus Project, she suggested that trying to replicate these results through this method in other communities can be complicated by the fact that “education policy is so decentralized — policy making when it comes to education goes district by district.” By understanding this, Smith has exercised flexible leadership as he has worked through each step of the program’s growth and change.

Noonan also noted that the best practices identified in the league’s Statement of Common Cause are evident in the Community Opus Project. These include interorganizational collaboration, looking beyond an orchestra’s own messages and having conversations with communities, being well informed, and “knowing what the state of play is.” Joe Landon, executive director of the California Alliance for Arts Education, agrees that what put SDYS in a position for success was knowing where there were gaps in programs, working with a community that was ready to partner, and then settling in to work alongside the district for the long haul. This was not about telling a district that they needed to put music back in the schools. Like El Sistema’s early efforts to build critical mass by offering free music lessons and forming ensembles throughout Venezuela, SDYS offered the district and parents an opportunity to see for themselves, at no charge, what could happen when students experience the joy of making music together.

When the district saw the results, they wanted to extend music to more children but clearly could not provide it alone. SDYS generously crossed the sacred boundary that historically separates “your work” from “our work” in the world of arts education advocacy. It offered the expertise and staff to help the district shine in a trusting and supportive way. Like El Sistema, they worked as a team, building community and strengthening bonds while building support

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from parents, funders, teachers, and principals alike for music in the schools. Smith is quick to note that one of the most exciting outcomes has been the ways in which everyone has been able to feel the pride and accomplishment that comes from being a part of something much bigger than themselves.

When Assistant Superintendent Nelson was asked what excites him now about the Community Opus Project, he unhesitatingly replied, “Knowing that this is leading to community transformation and we’ll have two community youth orchestras next year — it will transform lives here. Parents are going to be excited and making fools of themselves with pride.”

Victoria Plettner-Saunders is founder and chief strategist at v.p.s. cartographie, an arts research, planning, and strategy firm.

INTERVIEWS

- Eric Booth, arts education consultant and senior advisor for El Sistema in the United States
- Robert Gaan, board president, San Diego Youth Symphony and Conservatory
- Polly Kahn, vice president, Learning and Leadership Development, League of American Orchestras
- Joe Landon, executive director, California Alliance for Arts Education
- John M. Nelson III, assistant superintendent, Chula Vista Elementary School District
- Heather Noonan, vice president for advocacy, League of American Orchestras
- David Nygren, corporate governance and management consultant, Nygren Consulting LLC
- Jaclyn Rudderow, program and communications manager, VH1 Save The Music Foundation
- Dalouge Smith, president and CEO, San Diego Youth Symphony and Conservatory
- Lauren Widney, education and community program manager, San Diego Youth Symphony and Conservatory

NOTES

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