

Fostering Cultural Connections and Personal Growth to Empower El Paso Youth Through Music Education



Classrooms are not the only places that kids learn, and academic learning is only part of the whole child development needed to help youth discover the interests and talents that lead to success in the classroom, career, and beyond. More than 80% of Texas students' time is spent learning outside of school. High-quality out of school time (OST), which includes afterschool, summer, and enrichment programs, provides hands-on learning opportunities that help kids develop critical life skills as well as nurturing mentor and peer relationships that accelerate academic learning and prepare youth for their futures.

OST is a critical component of the functioning ecosystem of support necessary for whole child development and whole communities. Community-based providers are essential, offering in-person care and learning, while also connecting families to critical services and resources, such as food, technology, and healthcare. Strong partnerships between schools and these community-based organizations are vital to our state's successful recovery and future.

Music has a unique power to inspire, connect, and transform lives. In El Paso, Texas, the [Tocando Music Project](#) is using the power of music to create positive change in the lives of students. A project of the El Paso Symphony Orchestra, Tocando is providing free afterschool music programs that foster students' creativity, self-expression, and personal growth.

The other half of their music time is dedicated to Ensemble, where students collaboratively engage in a traditional string orchestra featuring violin, viola, cello, and bass. Through learning their chosen instruments, students work together to prepare for concerts. Every student actively participates in their chosen musical activity at their level of proficiency, which could involve singing, percussion, or string playing.

In collaboration with El Paso Independent School District (ISD) and Tornillo ISD, Tocando serves students in grades 2 through 9, offering music education to students who might otherwise lack access. The daily schedule begins with a combination of snack time, homework, and playtime. The students then immerse themselves in 90 minutes of music programming split into two distinct segments. The first half, Musicianship, delves into traditional music education, fostering musical literacy, composition skills, rhythmic understanding, and scale comprehension. With a focus on singing and percussion instruments, Musicianship ensures inclusivity across different skill levels and age groups, forming a strong musical foundation.

The program also encourages peer teaching, creating a sense of responsibility and camaraderie. As students progress, they have opportunities to mentor younger participants, fostering a positive cycle of learning and support. This approach not only enhances their musical skills but also nurtures leadership qualities that extend beyond the classroom.



El Sistema

Tocando was inspired by the Venezuelan music program El Sistema, which has revolutionized music education by providing free access to orchestral training for disadvantaged youth, focusing on ensemble playing and orchestral participation. El Sistema fosters musical skills as well as social development, discipline, and teamwork. Similarly, Tocando uses music to empower students, bridge educational gaps, and inspire a sense of belonging among students of diverse backgrounds.



The program's bilingual teaching environment highlights the community's linguistic diversity and enhances youth engagement. Curriculum is intentionally designed to incorporate music that resonates with the students and their families, who largely share Hispanic heritage. Jessie O'Hara Maestas, Director of Tocando Music Programs, explains, "We do this in an out of school time context, which means we have a lot more liberty with our curriculum and to be deeply culturally responsive."

With showcase events tied to significant cultural dates like Día de los Muertos and Mexican Independence Day, Tocando bridges the gap between traditional Western canon music and the music of the students' heritage. Students relate to the music they're learning, fostering a stronger, more inclusive connection to the program and with the community.



By The Numbers

Grades Served: 2-9

Weekly Program Hours: 6+

Student-Staff Ratio: 15/1

Number of Concerts Annually: 8

Curriculum Includes:

- Large String Ensemble
- Chamber Ensemble
- Private Music Lessons
- Bucket Band
- Singing and Music Theory
- Music Appreciation and Discussion

Opportunities:

- Scholarships to join the El Paso Symphony Youth Orchestra
- Performing with the El Paso Symphony Orchestra and the University of Texas El Paso faculty
- Unique Music Summer Camps

Noteworthy opportunities include scholarships to join the El Paso Symphony Youth Orchestra and shared performances with Symphony musicians. While Tocando is a music education program, it also forges connections with local educational institutions and museums, and its annual visit to the University of Texas El Paso exposes students to potential careers in S.T.E.A.M. fields.

O'Hara Maestas emphasized that the program's fundamental goal is to provide a holistic education, enriching students' lives with music and also with vital social and emotional skills. "We are working on developing social skills and critical thinking skills, self-confidence, ownership, and security in their environment through music."

Tocando focuses on building relationships and a supportive community, not only among the students but also among their families and educators. "Carnitas y Charlitas" family meetings are held every six weeks so that parents, guardians, and teachers can connect, discuss progress, and share insights about students' development, ensuring everyone involved is on the same page and working together to support the students' growth.

The Tocando Music Project is a testament to the impact music education can have on young lives. By offering a comprehensive curriculum, promoting cultural relevance, and fostering a strong sense of community, the program empowers students to thrive academically, emotionally, and socially. As students take ownership of their musical journeys and experience the joy of making music together, they gain the confidence and skills needed to succeed in all areas of life. Through Tocando, students are discovering their potential, finding their voices, and composing a brighter future for themselves and their community.

"When I perform, I want to feel hope that people understand what our music means to us and why we are playing it."

– 8th Grade Tocando student



TXPOST
TEXAS PARTNERSHIP FOR OUT OF SCHOOL TIME

The Texas Partnership for Out of School Time (TXPOST) is a statewide intermediary whose mission is to convene, educate, and advocate to improve the quality and increase the availability of out of school time (OST) opportunities, like those offered by Jubilee Park and Community Center, for Texas youth. TXPOST works in partnership with vital local and regional organizations, which invest deeply in their own communities to offer professional development opportunities, engage in system-building work, advocate for the OST field, and support local programs.

Contact Information

Jesse O'Hara Maestas

Director of Tocando Programs

Tocando Music Project

Phone: 575.405.3022

Email: johara@tocandomusicproject.org

Website: www.tocandomusicproject.org

