

# SUCCESS STORY: Inspired Together: Rethinking a School Orchestra Program



## COVID-19 Innovations and Responses

*This is the fourth in a series of success stories detailing innovations by arts education organizations in response to pandemic-related closures and modifications.*

### About AEP Success Stories

The Arts Education Partnership at Education Commission of the States is a national network of more than 100 organizations dedicated to advancing arts education. AEP has been supported by the National Endowment for the Arts and the U.S. Department of Education since 1995 and is administered by Education Commission of the States. AEP is the nation’s hub for arts and education leaders, building their leadership capacity to support students, educators and learning environments. Through research, reports, convenings and counsel, leaders gain knowledge and insights to ensure that all learners — especially those that have historically been marginalized — receive an excellent arts education. To achieve its goal to expand access to high-quality arts learning opportunities for all learners, AEP gathers detailed information on success stories with the potential to be replicated in communities across the country.

The Success Stories project collects submissions from organizations that highlight successful arts education programs. These stories demonstrate the benefits of arts integration across the education spectrum and promote continued collaboration and learning for individuals and organizations working toward student achievement and success.

In 2021, AEP added a fifth priority area to success stories to capture innovations by partners, affiliates and others in AEP’s network in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. This success story highlights the work of Council Bluffs School District in Council Bluffs, Iowa. This success story aligns with AEP’s new priority area: “COVID-19 Innovations and Responses.”

Arts Education Partnership interviewed Dan Black, a music educator in Council Bluffs School District in Iowa. Dan teaches students in orchestra (grades 6-12) and guitar (grade 8).

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## Interview

### Please describe the innovation(s) you’re sharing.

In our orchestra program, we took the moment of COVID to try something new. It was a project where students worked collaboratively to create and present an album. This was a deep dive into the “creating” process outlined in the [Iowa Fine Arts Standards](#), which are based on the [National Core Arts Standards](#). These “creating” standards are often overlooked in traditional, performance-focused ensemble classrooms. We weren’t putting on a concert because of safety concerns, so this was a great opportunity for us to try something new.

The project started with students individually exploring their sources of inspiration, compositional identity and voice in brief initial compositions. This was a way for them to dip their toes into the water as creating artists instead of just performing artists. They used digital audio workstation (DAW) software instead of pen and paper or other traditional notation tools. I thought it would be more authentic to use DAW to create music for an album since that’s what professional recording artists and producers use.

The second part of the project was done in pairs; students used photos — taken by themselves or their partner — as inspiration. This grounded their compositions in something personal and introduced multimedia. Students focused on crafting the beginning, middle and end of their pieces, working within harmonic structures and writing melodies to create a second composition.

The final part was a large group collaboration. Students created one final new track and took on roles and responsibilities to create their album: studio musician, audio engineer, web designer and marketing specialist. The outcome of the project was a [website](#) with individual band pages.

### What were the precipitating factors that led you to do things differently?

Our district started in a hybrid model, came back in person and then went back to hybrid. At the same time, teachers in our district were also teaching students in a full-time virtual academy. I wanted to bring a sense of authenticity to learners at home as much as learners on site, so I designed a project that lent itself to connection. For the second part of the project where students worked in pairs, I made sure to match students who were on site with students who were working virtually.

A main goal for this project was helping students explore their own musical voice. I never told students what they had to write, purposefully didn’t choose inspiration material for

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them to respond to and didn't curate examples. As a result, students experienced affirmation that they were sharing their own, unique voice. In a traditional orchestra classroom, it's often the conductor on the podium saying how it goes. This was a very different experience.

## **Who did you need to get involved, and were those relationships you already had or ones you had to build?**

One of our first needs was getting the DAW software — we chose [Soundtrap](#) — and we had to have a paid subscription to access the necessary capabilities and collaboration features. I wrote a grant proposal to the Council Bluffs Schools Foundation and heard within 24 hours that it was approved. I was able to secure about 170 licenses with that grant.

I was inspired by the [Modern Band Summit](#) hosted by (AEP partner) [Little Kids Rock](#). I attended last summer and started the guitar class this year using what I learned. The ideas and philosophies of Little Kids Rock are true for any classroom: Music should be for everyone, not just those who are interested or "talented", and we should put as few barriers as possible between children and music. This project was based on those principles.

Finally, Maud Hickey wrote a great book titled [Music Outside the Lines](#); this is where I got the ideas about inspiration and compositional identity that started students on their journey other tips and tricks to not only become effective, but to thrive as virtual educators.

## **What barriers did you encounter, and how did you deal with them?**

I had a logistical challenge with putting project groups together, because I intentionally wanted to connect students who were physically separated. I had to be very deliberate in providing collaborative resources while minimizing technological barriers, structuring class time equitably among student groups learning in various formats and implementing support structures like self-made tutorial videos or peer supports so students remained confident in the learning process.

The other barrier was that our traditional ensemble students are like any other students, they want to know the answer. It was both challenging and fun to work on problems that didn't have a clear solution. I had to help them see this as a learning process rather than a question for which they had to find the correct answer.

## **If you could go back in time and do the work again, what would you do differently (if anything)?**

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I wish I'd built in more recording requirements so students didn't lose touch with their instruments. Even when the success criteria included something like "your audio has to include a 30-second section of you improvising on your instrument," the actual implementation didn't go as planned. Students often overlooked those criteria as they tried to meet others.

## **Is there anything else you'd like to share?**

This project affirmed everyone's voice because all students started at square one. There were no advantages typically afforded to students that come from privileged backgrounds, such as private lessons or area youth orchestra participation. Every student brought enthusiasm for making music into their project, and many of the students who were never interested in auditioning at a college or participating in an honors ensemble excelled and even served as leaders in this work.

As we got into this process, I realized that rehearsals became less about refining and getting it right and more about intended effect. We started to ask ourselves: How do we interpret the composers' intent? What do we have to do with our instruments to meet that intent? What do we add as interpreters? We weren't practicing for a concert, so the music became a laboratory for our conversations as artists. I am so grateful for this opportunity. In any other year, we wouldn't have had flexibility and would've experienced pressure to get ready for the concert.

I surveyed students upon final submission of their group project. I asked, "How often should we create music in our class?" 12% of students said hardly ever or rarely, 50% said sometimes and 33% said often or very often. When I asked, "How often should we try new approaches to presenting our music outside of concerts?", more than half said often or very often, 40% said sometimes, and only 7% said hardly ever or rarely. I'm thrilled to see a lot of support within the student group for embracing a new approach post-COVID.

*If you're interested in learning more, Dan shared a [document](#) that outlines how he structured the project, with more information about specific prompts, standards and assessment tools.*