



The Learning Curve

September '05

Cargill Scholars® is an educational, social and economic development program for socio-economically disadvantaged children who attend school in Minneapolis or its northern and western suburbs. The program is designed to improve the academic achievement of 50 children who joined the program in the fourth grade (they are now in the eighth grade), with the goal being their successful completion of high school and admission into a postsecondary institution. The Cargill Foundation has committed up to \$5 million over five years to Cargill Scholars.

Listen to the music

Music lessons were not part of the original program design for Cargill Scholars. A few months after the program started, when we worked out the “underpinnings”—science, math and writing—we decided to include music. We realized that music lessons would be the most challenging in terms of time, commitment and logistics for the parents and the Scholars—and also expensive to provide—but the team thought it was worth a try.

Solid research has shown a positive link between music lessons (particularly individual lessons rather than group settings) and doing well in school. But in addition to developing those brain cells, we saw that music lessons would support organizational skills, math, focus, patience, persistence, poise and confidence. We weren't necessarily trying to grow 50 serious musicians, but we did want to let the Scholars explore a potential talent that they otherwise might not have the opportunity to pursue.

We chose the MacPhail Center for Music, in Minneapolis, as our primary partner for music lessons. MacPhail was very excited about joining Cargill Scholars. They began trying to figure out how to schedule individual music lessons for 50 fourth grade beginners. The next challenge was to find instruments. We asked Cargill employees to search their basements, attics and garages, and they responded enthusiastically. We received enough instruments for about half of the students and rented instruments for the rest.

We have held about a half-dozen recitals over the years and it is encouraging to see how many of the Scholars have progressed. In the fall of their seventh-grade year they were playing pieces that we could recognize without looking at the program! It is heart-warming to see the expressions on the families' faces when their child is on stage.

We know some of them will have stories to pass on to their children about how they dreaded music lessons or how they wish they had stuck with it. Others might be playing music with their families or—who knows?—making sure their own children take music lessons one day.

Toni Green

Senior Program Officer, Cargill Foundation

The nuts and bolts

Choosing an instrument. At an open house, the Cargill Scholars got to see and hear the six instruments among which they could choose: piano, violin, flute, clarinet, trumpet, percussion. These choices were determined partly by popularity and partly by the availability of instructors to take a number of beginners.

Fifty schedules. It took longer than expected to get the schedules lined up. The program team decided to keep transportation costs lower by trying to arrange lessons only on Tuesdays and Thursdays. That made it harder to match instructors with students, so some Scholars had to switch instruments. Those who chose to learn piano took group lessons at first, because there were so many of them, so they got started right away. The schedules settled in by the second half of the school year, and by the first recital most of the Scholars were on their way.

Moving from “have to” to “want to.” At first, the music lessons were required. Nobody got to quit, except in one or two exceptional cases. Then, in the fourth year, as Scholars entered the eighth grade, the program team decided to make music lessons optional. About one-third of the Scholars dropped their lessons, primarily those who were not practicing or attending regularly. In some cases this was for positive reasons, such as involvement in other arts, sports, or academic activities.

At that age, I don't think there's a full appreciation of what practicing can do for you. It teaches discipline. Having to practice regularly is how you improve and see success—no matter what you are working on.”

- LaVerne Pargo
Program Manager



Photo: StoneArch Creative

Mohammed performs in a Cargill Scholars recital.

In the summer between fourth and fifth grade, almost all the Scholars attended a mandatory one-week music camp to learn to play in groups. This past summer, between seventh and eighth grade, four Scholars attended the (now optional) music camp.

The chance to continue. A handful of Scholars have blossomed with exceptional talent and involvement in music. Two who play the trumpet have gone to hear their instructor play in a band around town. They play at special events, they write their own music—they love their instrument. One Scholar is learning two instruments. Some are taking lessons or participating in music through their school.

However, it's also worth noting that among the two-thirds of the Scholars who have chosen to continue their music lessons into the eighth grade, not all are this deeply involved. Many of them are just faithfully attending lessons, doing the required practicing, and keeping at it. Clearly, they and their families see benefits even if music is not the center of their life at this point.

For the Scholars who have shown interest and dedication, the MacPhail Center for Music intends to raise scholarship funds to help them continue after Cargill Scholars concludes in 2006.

“One day I might want to be a person that plays in a band and goes to different places.”

- Anthony, Cargill Scholar

Taking the stage. The first Cargill Scholars recital, in December 2002, was quite an event. A video crew was on hand and the auditorium was filled to the brim. Unlike most other MacPhail recitals, which feature a mix of beginning and advanced students, this one was one-hundred percent beginners. The caliber of performance advanced markedly with each recital (typically in December and April). Twenty-three Cargill Scholars played in the most recent recital. That one was held jointly with another school-related program that works with MacPhail, so it showcased a wider range of ages and skill levels.

“I like playing piano. Before recitals I’m really nervous, but once I get there my nerves go away.”

- Thoua, Cargill Scholar

“The positive relationships the students have forged with the teachers here at MacPhail have changed our teachers’ lives as well.”

**- Leslie Fideler
Partnerships Manager,
MacPhail Center for Music**

By the numbers

- In 2004-05, two-thirds of the Scholars were still participating in music lessons. The number of lessons received by individual Scholars tapered off after the first few years, to an average of 13 hours per music student in 2004-05.
- 91% of parents in the most recent survey said the Scholars who were taking lessons were also practicing their instruments, typically one to four times per week.
- Virtually all parents and students have said Cargill Scholars helped them develop musical skills. Parents' ratings on this rose significantly after the 2003-04 school year—when the students had two years of lessons behind them and were beginning to make “real music.”

- *Wilder Research evaluation survey*

Bottom line

If the project team had to choose between musical and academic instruction, there would be no question—academics come first. We consider the music lessons a gift for the 35 students who would not otherwise have had this experience. By learning to make music, the students have also worked on eye-hand coordination, gained poise in public performance, and learned about different types of music. Was it worth spending program dollars on music lessons? The project team thinks it was.

Next issue: The write stuff

Whether it's putting pen to paper or putting keyboard to plasma screen, how do you help students grow into capable writers? The next Cargill Scholars Learning Curve looks at writing skills, plus several extras that were added as the need arose—technology skills, girls' leadership training, and more.



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For more information about Cargill Scholars, visit www.cargill.com.

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Research reports on Cargill Scholars are available at www.wilderresearch.org.