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[ROCK AND ROLL MIDDLE SCHOOL]
Beyond Basic Band: Academy Gives Students a Chance to Create, Collaborate

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James Bass, a sixth-grade student in the Rock and Roll Academy at McLaughlin Middle School and Fine Arts Academy in Lake Wales, plays drums in one of the three "practice hubs" on Thursday.

PAUL CRATE | LEDGER MEDIA GROUP

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THE LEDGER

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LAKE WALES | In full swing, the dim, studio-like classroom of the Rock and Roll Academy bustles with students.

Simultaneously, 48 hands are either plucking guitar and bass strings, traveling over keyboards, building rhythms on electronic drum sets or gripping microphones.

Members of three bands listen to their instruments through

Facts

HOW TO APPLY

To apply for the Rock and Roll Academy and other programs, visit www.polkedoptions.com. Applications are due by Jan. 9 for the 2015-16 school year. Polk's educational options include magnet and choice schools, career academies, fine

headphones while one group plugs into amplifiers and plays on a small, raised stage complete with flashing colored lights.

arts schools and International Baccalaureate programs.

The teacher, Micky Caban, might be seen helping a singer find the right notes or guiding students as they try to figure out the equipment, but after roll call she won't be seen standing in front of the class.

"It's their responsibility to discover things for themselves," she said. "I'm basically just an adult in the room."

And the McLaughlin Middle School and Fine Arts Academy students love the independence.

It took a while for them to figure it out in the beginning, Caban said.

After years of learning from a teacher, they didn't know what to do at first when told they would be in charge of their own learning.

Caban helped show them the basics of how to play the different instruments, but the rest has been students experimenting, researching on their own, and learning from their peers.

On a given day, the room might be filled with the drum beat from "Best Day of My Life" by American Authors or tunes from Alicia Keys or One Republic.

Eighth-grader Amber Blevins said she read about the academy online and decided to sign up because she's a big music fan and it sounded cool.

"I like that we choose our own band, our songs and get our own space," she said.

Her father taught her how to play the guitar, but since signing up for the class she has also been learning how to play the piano and drums and to sing.

PLAYING CURRENT HITS

Although it's called the Rock and Roll Academy, most of the 18 bands have chosen to perform pop songs.

Having the freedom to choose which song to do is one of the highlights for students.

Many students also said they love the chance to perform, although some of them have to be coaxed into singing audibly or moving to the music.

Eighth-grader Destini Henry said she was shy before being placed in the academy.

Since August, she said, she has been learning to work independently, work in a team, sing, and play guitar, drums and piano.

But most of all, she has found herself challenged to get outside of her comfort zone.

"One of our things in this class is to become fearless," she said, "and I think I've achieved that."

TAKING OWNERSHIP OF THEIR LEARNING

The Rock and Roll Academy, a program created by educator and musician Mark Galbo in 2003, is designed to encourage students to take ownership of their learning.

Along the way, they develop self-awareness, self-management skills, social awareness, relationship skills and responsible decision making skills, Caban said.

Students create bonds through the sometimes-rocky process of learning how to compromise and work together to choose songs, make artistic choices and refine their sound.

Superintendent of Schools Kathryn LeRoy brought the academy and another program, Music Industry Leadership 101, to McLaughlin to give students more options in hopes of inspiring academic gains.

The school received an F grade for the 2012-13 school year and a D grade for 2013-14.

The Leadership program uses curriculum developed by Usher's New Look, a nonprofit foundation sponsored by R&B artist Usher Raymond IV.

BUSINESS SKILLS

It was created to expose students to the business side of the music industry, including branding, marketing, leadership and economics.

In the second half of the school year, Leadership students will work with the Rock and Roll Academy bands to try out skills like branding and marketing.

Academy students will spend the second half of the school year experimenting with improvisation, putting their own spin on songs and writing original songs.

The idea behind the academy is to get students to take an active role in their own learning, to be motivated by artistic choice and expression, and to grow socially and emotionally.

Caban said she has already seen a difference in the students in her

classes.

Those who don't like coming to school come anyway because they don't want to let their bands down, she said.

Some students who were struggling to find friends have bonded with their bandmates and found a place they belong.

"When they're in here, they're part of something," Caban said.

Others find the academy a welcome creative or emotional outlet.

Sixth-grader James Bass said he joined the academy because music is important to him.

"I like music, and music is the only way to solve my problems," he said.

Bass, who has been playing drums for his band, said he has also found that music helps him focus when doing work for his advanced classes.

"I can see the growth in the students socially and musically," said Sharon Chipman, principal of McLaughlin. She said she hopes the academic growth will follow.

"(Caban's) energy level and her enthusiasm have overflowed to the children," Chipman said. "They have that 'I'm ready, I can do this' attitude."

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