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South Tech High opens rock and roll academy

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December 24, 2013 | Lois K. Solomon, Sun Sentinel

BOYNTON BEACH A deafening cacophony fills a music room at South Tech Academy, with students beating drums, frolicking at pianos and thrumming electric guitars.

Almost all had never played an instrument before a few months ago. Now they are writing music and performing in authentic rock bands.

They are in the first class of the Rock and Roll Academy at the public charter school, in a new program designed to build students' self-confidence as they learn the music business. As part of the program, students create new bands each week and perform for the school on Fridays.



South Tech High students jam during a practice session at the Rock and Roll... (Taimy Alvarez)

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"You would think we've been doing this forever," said Sierra Gill, 14, a freshman who plays in a band called "The Survivals," as students rehearsed noisily around her. "I want to go to school so I can get to this class every day."

In its first year at South Tech, 170 students have signed up for the elective Rock and Roll class. Plans call for transforming the class into a career academy, which provides a job path along with a traditional education. South Tech offers 12 academies, including cosmetology, automotive technology, veterinary assisting and culinary arts.

"We are trying to do something completely different in the school system," said Sandi Hagood, a Palm Beach County [School District](#) music teacher for five years, who teaches the classes with Sarah Blas, who has played in community bands and has a vocal performance degree.

The goal is for students to become well-rounded in music by learning an assortment of instruments and music styles, and to develop skills to work in the entertainment industry, with jobs such as band manager, music promoter or casino supervisor, Hagood said.

Hagood and Blas teach the instruments with help from books and YouTube videos.

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"I couldn't believe how quickly I learned to play" piano, said Annette Etienne, 17, a senior. "I loved how they taught it to us, with a drawing of the piano."

The Rock and Roll Academy is one of four nationwide, with plans for four more in the coming years, founder Mark Galbo said. Galbo, a former professional musician who lives in Colorado, said each school develops its own style, but all allow students to choose their own music, collaborate and learn by playing.

"The true target of the program is autonomy and moral independence," Galbo said. "The kids are taught not to be afraid to try new things and deal with ambiguity."

These goals are experienced each week at South Tech during Performance Fridays, when students play for fellow students, faculty and parents. Students are graded on effort and behavior, "not on skill," Hagood said.

Shamir Bezaras, 14, who likes Pearl Jam, Nirvana and Metallica, said he is interested in playing in a band professionally, but plans to get an automotive technology degree from the school to play it safe. He plays drums but is also learning guitar and bass.

"There were so many people here who couldn't play bass before," Bezaras said. "Now they're monsters."

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