

MARK WOOD AT WACO ISD

When you look at him you may think he's from an 80's hair band, long tresses, leather pants, wrist bands but where one would expect to see an electric guitar, there's a violin. Like most things about Mark Wood it's non-traditional: an electric violin.

A Julliard alumnus, Wood is known to get toes tapping in the classroom. He travels around the country with his band to different schools. His goal is to bring 17th century music into the 21st century, and teach students the value in all music genres.

Wood is coming to schools in Waco ISD this fall with his program "Electrify Your Strings".

Wood changes student's perceptions of what their instruments are capable of, and shows them how they can express their creativity through their instrument.

"I love working with kids who want to participate in their music and not just play what I call the black dots on a white page," Wood says. "When you think about the culture of the 1700s and Mozart, that culture doesn't exist anymore. We have been able to create a niche and use technology never used before. It helps students interact with the music."

Like many other public school orchestra programs, Waco ISD works to build a large base of beginning string players to ensure thriving programs all the way through high school. Many students in elementary school that only have orchestra as a choice for special programming will leave to join other programs (band, choir, athletics) as the programs become available to them during their middle school years. The result of students dropping out of traditional school music programs comes from a lack of musical selections that suit their interests. This can create a cultural chasm between the music these kids have on their iPods and what they are playing in class.

There's a couple of reasons why kids aren't playing the music they like in orchestra class. One, while arrangements for contemporary, main-stream music is common for band, similar arrangements are not as common for orchestra. Two, music scores are expensive. Why would a school invest significant funds into a dwindling program?

Two years ago, a group called Velocity came to area WISD schools. Velocity, like Wood's band, is a performance group that provides orchestral workshops for students. The group ignited the student's passion for orchestral music.

Tennyson Middle School and Waco High School started a performance group for orchestra. Because of new student interest Orchestra Director Maryann Driessner, would spend evenings transposing music for her students. Before she died this is what she said about Velocity in a letter:

"They are really excited about continuing the group and have even brought me CD's of songs they think would be good. This really opened up their minds to new and different possibilities and once they started "brainstorming" it was hard to get them to stop.

I thank you so much for this opportunity. We may have created a monster, but it's a great monster. This is such a good way to motivate the students and incorporate new and different ideas of what playing a string instrument can be."

Driessner suffered a heart attack and passed away the night before Velocity's inaugural performance. The Waco high and Tennyson orchestra students, although they had the option to cancel, went ahead with their scheduled performance that day.

Like many other fine arts programs in Texas, art educators in Waco ISD work diligently to create interest in programs, as well as justify the need to maintain staffing levels and budgetary dollars. Without proper, or innovative types of support, arts programs, especially orchestra can be left hanging by a string. Thanks to Cultural Arts of Waco and the Waco ISD foundation, Mark Wood's visit to area schools is a continuation of the energy that started with the group Velocity. Both these groups felt that if given the right motivation, students will continue to participate in orchestra.

Wood will visit eight Waco ISD schools rehearsing innovative music with students, and performing at school assemblies; not to mention performing at the upcoming Waco Cultural Arts Festival. Not all the schools have the staff or budget to introduce orchestra programs though. While many schools within Waco ISD still can not offer string instruction to its students, there's hope that Wood's performances here will generate enough interest in orchestra to grow the program throughout the city of Waco.