

The Circle of Drums Brings Us Together

by Kris Capps
2-20-2008

Keeping hands OFF the new drumming circle is the hardest thing for young musicians at the Denali Borough School District.

But that is just one lesson they are learning, thanks to a grant from the Association of Alaska School Board's Alaska Initiative for Community Engagement.

The 16 African drums arrived this Fall, all different sizes and different tones. The design around the drums is called "kinta" – a pattern worn exclusively by African chiefs. Only men are allowed to weave this colorful cloth, in narrow strips – an unexpected cultural bonus lesson for students.

Anyone can drum, regardless of age, and we are just beginning to touch the surface. Since October 2007, about 150 students began drumming during regular music classes. On Dec. 4, 25 DBSD faculty members tried drumming during a routine staff meeting.

The drums were introduced to the Healy community at-large (about 250 people, parents, family, friends) when they were featured in the K-5 Winter Concert.

Seventy-two Tri-Valley School elementary students and 50 Anderson School students all took turns tapping on the drums. Music Teacher Candace Mainiero starts simple, using rhythms with words, like "Piz – Za – Pie" or "What is your name – tap tap tap TAP?" Students then answer with taps that match their names: "My name is Kris" or tap tap tap TAP.

Participants are learning, not just the basics of drumming, but they are starting to help each other and learning to work together as a team. It doesn't take long for them to discover when they do that, their multiple taps sound as one strong TAP.

Mainiero describes the drumming progress of these young musicians as "phenomenal."

"Their rhythm is improving as individuals and as a group, improvisation of rhythms is getting more in-depth, and they are enjoying the challenge," she said. "As soon as they enter the classroom, they all ask if they are drumming."

Indeed, the week the drums were introduced, second- and third-grade students raved about the experience in their weekly classroom newsletters.

"On drums, we say what we want for dinner and then we try to play it. Music rocks!" wrote David.

"Music is cool," wrote Taylor. "We are practicing the drums. We are practicing with our name in beats."

The young musicians are learning to focus and to communicate with each other. It is exciting to watch students share these new skills and new awareness with their peers.

Our plan now is to expand the drumming circle to the community. We already feel like the community has a stake in the drumming circle, since they helped make it happen. While the AASB \$2,000 grant foot the bulk of the bill, the remaining \$1,000 came from a community fund established during a fantastic music fundraiser last spring.

Hence, we are especially anxious to share this new bonding tool with community members. We want them to see that their support of music facilitates their direct involvement.

We also expect to garner new partnerships and we expect the drumming circle itself will make it easy to “drum up” those new connections.

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