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Story title:

Saving the Music, VH1 gives Wilkinsburgh \$90,000 for music

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Elementary students in the Wilkinsburg School District are singing and playing a new tune thanks to a \$90,000 grant from VH1's Save The Music Foundation, Houlihan's and Comcast.

The funds will buy eight flutes, 11 clarinets, three alto saxophones, six trumpets, four trombones, a bass drum, a snare drum, a set of crash cymbals and a set of orchestra bells each for Turner, Johnston and Kelly elementary schools.

In addition, students will receive 80 minutes of class instruction per week for their instruments, as opposed to last year's program, a partnership with the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra in which a small number of students in grades 5-8 were taught to play during recess time.

"I'm ecstatic," said Archie Perrin, district superintendent. "It's a good example of positive change that can take place within an urban community to promote academic excellence."

Rob Davidson of the Save The Music Foundation, who worked for the PSO from 1999 until 2005, said his experience with the district in 2004 wasn't forgotten once he was hired at VH1.

"I started working here, bringing the symphony here to bolster its music program," he said. "There was always a lack of instruments at Wilkinsburg."

"When I got the job at Save The Music, I wanted to make sure I got musical instruments for Wilkinsburg."

Elementary band director Ray Strobel said the new instruments not only would spark a new interest in learning for elementary students, but would bolster the middle and high school bands.

Mr. Strobel said students who play for the high school band should have at least five years of experience playing their instrument, but most students going into Wilkinsburg High School have had significantly less experience.

"I have been working with the high school band and have seen numbers actually getting smaller," he said. "We're trying to build a feeder program so those numbers can begin to grow."

So far, 90 elementary students have signed up for the program and 30 got to test the new instruments Friday during a presentation ceremony at Kelly.

Camille Simpson Price, a 10-year-old fifth-grader at Kelly, said she was excited about the opportunity to play the saxophone because it would make her mother proud.

"I like it because my mom said when she was in elementary school, she wanted to play the saxophone, but she didn't get the chance. So she wants me to play," she said.

Ten-year-old Carizma Evans said just having the instruments available would change the way some students think about school.

"They're probably going to feel happy because they're learning how to play," she said, cupping the mouthpiece of her flute, the only piece she was given to sample because she didn't know how to put the instrument together.

Mr. Davidson said Carizma and every other student in the band will learn how to put together and properly care for their instruments in the next few weeks. And as a music program blossoms where there was none during this academic year, VH1 can consider its mission to save the music to be on the right track in Wilkinsburg.

"It's an honor to bring the VH1 Save the Music program to Wilkinsburg because I know it's a community that needs that help and wants to get that going," Mr. Davidson said.