

A Talk with Paul Felix, Principal of Nosotros Academy



In October 2015, Director of UpBeat Brian J. Harris sat down with Paul Felix at Nosotros to discuss the Lead Guitar and UpBeat programs at the school.



BJH: How are the arts different from other disciplines?

PF: There are a variety of ways to know that a kid is learning. One of the best ways that I see that demonstrated is in the arts, because you have to produce. It's not at the end of 3 weeks, it's real-time production. So there's a real quality of accountability built into the arts if done well, like Lead Guitar/UpBeat does. You have to produce, you have to perform, and it is in a very obvious way.

The state tests, the benchmark assessments—that's important and necessary, but to me, [playing a musical instrument] is more real to kids. It's immediate. You can see it, you can feel it. There's a real measure of accountability. It also takes them out of their universe in many ways. They're not sitting at their desk and pushing a pencil. They're dealing with things that are often out of their comfort zone.

BJH: What kind of arts access do your students have outside of school?

PF: The only place these kids have a chance to get that is in school. Parents are either too busy, or don't have the resources, or don't have the training themselves. Probably not one person at home has a high school diploma, much less a college degree. Very few of my students have an instrument in the home. Of all the kids we have in the Guitar Club, only one has brought a guitar from home. That's why we have the guitar check-out program here.

BJH: What do you see arts classes doing for students?

PF: It gives them another source of positive dialogue, talking about their guitar or percussion class. Not only does it get them out of their comfort zone, it also gives them an opportunity to perform out in the community—the UA Gala, the Honors Night. I'd really like to create a culture of performance of music. I realize that takes years to create, but I don't have that. I get pissed off when someone tells me, "You don't have a culture of music here, so we can't do that." I'm thinking, "Yeah, I know I have a bunch of ghetto kids who don't know nothing. OK, I know that. I need to improve that. I need to change the dynamics of that, and you gotta start somewhere, and you gotta start by believing in these kids."

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I think sometimes the adults are the problem. We limit their universe because we box them into these categories. I know they're poor, I know they

have learning problems. I know all that. But I believe that children can rise above their circumstances given the right opportunities and the right support and the right modeling, and that's why Lead Guitar/UpBeat is here. The people Lead Guitar/UpBeat brings in are the elevators to help improve the students' culture. Lead Guitar/UpBeat provides a positive environment to improve the culture and produce something that can be shared with others. That's hard to do with test scores.

To me, the fine arts are the pinnacle of learning, the pinnacle of being a human being. When you're producing at that level, you're beyond just survival and going day to day. You're producing something that's infinitely so positive. And if I can have my kids participate in that, that's a huge leap from their circumstances, and I think it gives them a way to build self-esteem.

BJH: What's different about Lead Guitar/UpBeat compared to other arts instruction you've had?

PF: Lead Guitar's process [is different]. Not only does the instruction have to be quality, but you also need quantity and consistency to get that level of performance. It is resource-intensive; you have to make choices. But I think we have more now—not only in the music program, but in our studio arts program, we're providing more. Having the availability of high-quality guest teachers that I can pull in here is very important to me

because it's very hard for me to support even one full-time teacher. What I've seen happen is families coming to performances. Having those families show up at the UA Gala event, I was surprised at the number of families that came.

BJH: What are the challenges of establishing an arts program at a school like Nosotros?

PF: One of the most difficult things that I have is to get parental involvement. [One of my parents is a] single mom working at Starr Pass.

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It's very difficult for her to get to a performance, but [she came to the UA Gala concert]. To me, the [parental] support has exceeded my expectations. The family is seeing that we're investing in their kid, their student. We don't have to do this. We could provide a keyboarding class and bore them to death. You have to make choices. I've always seen the fine arts as an integral part of a good education. I'm trying to find ways to do that in this environment in this economy. To me, it's changing the paradigm—through enriching and intervening at the right time, with the right resources.

BJH: How has Lead Guitar/UpBeat helped overcome these challenges?

PF: Parents ask their kids, "At this school, you're going to be doing what? You're going to [perform at] the U of A?" That's changing the dynamic. That's a big deal! To me, it's to enrich the culture, change the dialogue, give them a break away from the doldrums of the classroom. To me, Lead Guitar/UpBeat has given us a resource to attempt that, and I think we have. If you had been at this school in 2002 when it first opened, you would have turned around and gone home. We ran the gun buyback program—it was run out of Nosotros.

Nosotros Academy is a K-12 charter school in Tucson, AZ that offers both remedial and accelerated curriculum.