

WORCESTER CHAMBER MUSIC SOCIETY



Neighborhood Strings



Program Assessment



2012 - 2017



TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	Page 3
Introduction	
Program Description	Page 4
Program History	Page 4
Student Demographics	Page 5
Executive Summary	
Evaluation Design.....	Page 6
Evaluation Process.....	Page 6
Findings	
Major Findings.....	Page 7
Retention Rates.....	Page 9
Academic Data.....	Page 10
Recommendations	
Challenges and Recommendations.....	Page 10
Addendum	
Student Evaluation Responses.....	Page 12
Parent Evaluation Responses.....	Page 15
Logic Model.....	Page 16



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We are grateful to the many high school and college mentors who assisted in the evaluation student interview process.



INTRODUCTION

Program Description

With music as our vehicle, we believe in weaving together a strong fabric of community that safeguards youth and engenders sustainable transformation inside and outside the classroom.

Neighborhood Strings is a community-based program of the Worcester Chamber Music Society (WCMS) that offers free music lessons in violin, viola and cello to youth from Worcester's Downtown and Main South neighborhoods. The program provides affordable, high-quality arts education, fosters family involvement, and is open and accessible to the neighborhoods. Youth learn to make music together with musicians and friends from the WCMS. In the process, they discover a creative outlet that hones life skills like discipline, cooperation, imagination, and leadership. Teachers work to forge strong relationships with students that strengthen WCMS's ties to the community. The focus is not just on the child as a musician, but the child as a citizen and a contributing member of society.

The program runs 4 days a week. Students, ages 6-15 receive weekly lessons during after-school hours, most attending 2-3 times a week. We also help connect students with practice mentors and lead additional free concert trips, including trips to see WCMS concerts. As in any community-based program, Neighborhood Strings aims for a give-and-take learning relationship with its youth and families. Rather than imparting knowledge and skills in one direction, the program strives for a model that shares knowledge in both directions. The teachers, mentors, and performers of WCMS are as enriched by the relationship to their own communities as the neighborhoods are enriched in return.

Lessons take place at Woodland Academy, a neighborhood school in the Main South area, and the Seven Hills Charter Public School, located in downtown Worcester serving a diverse cross-section of Worcester children. Neighborhood Strings seeks especially to serve traditionally marginalized communities, but is open and accessible for all.

Program History

Neighborhood Strings began as the result of the musicians of WCMS questioning what could happen if we started a program connecting artists with at-risk youth in the Main South neighborhood of Worcester. Growing out of this question, six years ago our musicians formed a partnership with Woodland Academy in Worcester's Main South neighborhood.

2012-2013: Program begins with group lessons, 15 students twice a week at Woodland Academy.

2013-2014: Program expands to 20 students, 3 times a week. Includes private lessons, small ensemble and All Play Day. "NS Club", a teen leadership group, is introduced.



2014-2015: Program expands to 26 students. Expansion includes a week of intensive summer musical activities that helped to meet the community need for productive, high-quality summer arts activities.

2015-2016: Program expands to 38 students and a second community site, Seven Hills Charter Public School, located in downtown Worcester serving a cross-section of Worcester children. Recipient of Massachusetts Cultural Council SerHacer grant. Scholarship is available for Neighborhood Strings students to attend WCMS's Summer Chamber Music Camp.

2016-17: Program expands to 46 students. New collaboration with Clark University to co-teach a course titled "Music, Community and Social Action" which adds 12 additional mentors to the program. Neighborhood Strings selected to receive the prestigious **2017 Arts|Learning "Outstanding Community Arts Education Collaborative—Music" award.**

Demographics

The youth enrolled in Neighborhood Strings are residents of downtown and Main South Worcester, both diverse, low-income neighborhoods in the city of Worcester, which has struggled for many years to regain its footing after a precipitous post-industrial decline. A closer look at Main South reveals severe distress in a number of indicators. According to recent census data, of the 12,000 residents of the one-square-mile area, close to 80% are classified as low-income, and 37.8% live beneath the poverty rate, compared with 20.1% in the city of Worcester and 11% in Massachusetts. The neighborhood struggles with a pervasive climate of violence: though the neighborhood accounts for less than 10% of the city's population, it represents a third of drug-related arrests. There is also a need for quality programming for the 3,000 youth in Main South. At Woodland Academy, one of our program sites, only 17% of students performed at grade level by 6th grade in 2013.

Neighborhood Strings student ethnic backgrounds in 2016-2017:

Latino	21	46%
African American	18	40%
Asian	3	7%
Caucasian/other	3	7%



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY ---

Evaluation Design

Neighborhood Strings strives to make a deep and wide-ranging impact on youth participants and family members. As such, in order to explore the results of being part of the Neighborhood Strings community, we need to look at social and developmental effects as well as artistic achievement. Our assessment looks at short and longer-term outcomes in three primary areas of engagement.

- 1) Artistry: Includes technical and musical ability on the instrument, dedication to improvement in regular practice and performance, and general knowledge about the history and current practice of musicianship.
- 2) Social and Personal Development: This area includes skills like confidence voicing one's opinions, the ability to set and achieve goals, and the strength to ask for help and be open to criticism and praise. These are the deeper skills that might stem from musicianship but can guide students far beyond the practice room and stage.
- 3) Connection to the World: This concept encompasses the idea that music can open up a wider world to youth participants, both directly in Worcester and beyond. It might mean seeing a different side of one's own community (playing in the Mustard Seed or Mechanics Hall) or feeling connected to, and inspired by, the community of musicians around the globe. It means feeling the opportunity inherent in the network of mentors, and can also mean exposure to different kinds of thought and concepts of social justice.

Our intention in this assessment is to look honestly at whether we see positive changes in these areas of development in young people during their participation in Neighborhood Strings. Through this lens, we intend to strengthen our core outcomes in the short and long term, as well as encourage a culture of reflection in our practices.

Evaluation Process

The evaluation process takes place annually through extensive year-end evaluations with both youth and parents, conducted in an interview-style process. All students had one-on-one help from teachers or mentors in approaching the evaluation. Students also complete a semi-annual learning plan that allows them to set down goals and reflect on their achievements at intervals during the year.

Mentors also responded to questions asking to describe their experiences working with youth in the program.



FINDINGS

Below please find a summary of our major findings in each of the three major areas of inquiry. Student and Parent Evaluation responses can be found in the Addendum section.

Major Findings

Artistry: In the basic skills of musicianship, the foundation of all we do, students reported almost universal perception of improvement. In the areas of note-reading, rhythm, sound production, and intonation, 90-100% of respondents felt they improved their skills. Youth had 11 public performances in 2016-17, including an appearance with Mayor Joe Petty of Worcester and two in Mechanics Hall, and in a large variety of formal and informal circumstances. Most students (82%) reported increased confidence in performing, and also felt they saw improvement from week to week. 64% of students said they were practicing more, leaving room for improvement in that important category. Four students from Neighborhood Strings attended WCMS's ChamberFest in 2017, demonstrating a desirable level of musicianship after 4-5 years of playing.

Social and Personal Development: Reflections were heartening and suggested that we have begun to fulfill our goals of personal agency and esteem among youth. For example, 85% of our participants answered that since starting the program, "they have higher expectations for themselves" and 73% answered that "they feel more confident voicing their opinions." Students cited creativity, initiative and self-direction, communication and collaboration, and productivity/accountability as skills they felt Neighborhood Strings has helped them develop the most. Many students responded that they perceived directly how Neighborhood Strings has contributed to developing those skills. 100% of parent respondents also noted that their children seemed proud of their accomplishments, and 92% noted that their children had higher expectations of themselves.

Student responses

"Before I had a hard time talking out now I'm more confident speaking out."

"Before I had no creativity with my music. Now I can write music and read it."

"Before, I was scared to share my thoughts. Now, I am flexible to adjust to new conditions."

"Before I had less patience looking for solutions to problems. Now I am a little more patient with solutions and issues I can't resolve."

"We always communicate and work together when things are hard."

"They have opened my imagination even farther."

"Before I was little, I had no power to lead. Now I can lead with responsibility."

"Neighborhood Strings has helped me develop flexibility. Before liked to stick to normal and regular. Now I am open to new things and want to make new friends."

Connection to the World:

Students showed their perceived connection to the wider world through music in two primary ways: first, through connecting to a wide variety of musical experiences; second, through a structured community of support comprised of teachers, mentors, peers and family.

88% of students noted that "music connects me more to my community," and an additional 88% observed that "I understand better how music can make a difference in my community." 85% of students also noted that "I know more options for my future" because of Neighborhood Strings.



100% of parent respondents noted that their children seemed more connected to their community. In their responses, students noted the trips to Boston and Mechanics Hall most frequently as stand-out musical experiences. Outside of lessons, they played most frequently for family members at home, at religious services, and at school. They thought widely about where music could take them, including the opportunity to travel around the country and abroad, and to college.

- Students in the NS Club were more likely than younger peers to mention realistic visions of a musical future, including summer camps, travel and performances abroad.
- Students at the Seven Hills site were more likely to see the connection between musicianship and college.
- Students of all ages frequently mention “being a mentor” or similar goals in the question asking them to envision themselves in ten years. This suggests students from an early age see the connection between their musical journey and the achievements of the mentors.

Youth and parents noted deep connections to teachers, peers and mentors, creating a virtual web of support and community around music-making.

Parent responses:

“All of the teachers/mentors have an impact. Especially, Ariana and Peter. They are wonderful, positive influence.”

“Absolutely! Music creates more bond in the community. It gives possibilities and opportunities for children, outside of school work. It teaches them discipline and focus.”

“Yes, it is a universal language that transcends all facets of everyday people’s loves and makes them feel elated.”

Mentors also noted in their responses that their experience working with Neighborhood Strings students brings them in closer contact with their community. Mentors were overwhelmingly positive in their reflections on working with students, teachers, and schools.

NS Mentor:

“One of my favorite parts of being an NS mentor is the fact that it connects me so closely to the Main South community. Although Clark is situated in the center of this Worcester neighborhood, being a student there can often feel isolating, as though I’m trapped in a bubble of academia and disconnected from the real world. Working with NS, I have the privilege to get to know kids who are literally my neighbors, to talk to their families and become a part of their lives. This not only makes me feel more at home in Worcester, but reminds me of the ways in which making music together has the powerful potential to create joy and community in any space, be it a school classroom, a university theater, or Mechanics Hall.”



Retention Rates

We looked at total enrollment over the first five years of the program (2012-2017).

Total enrolled students in Fall of 2017:	50
Total attrition, Fall 2012 – Fall 2017:	28

- **62% of all students who enrolled during the first five years are still in the program.**

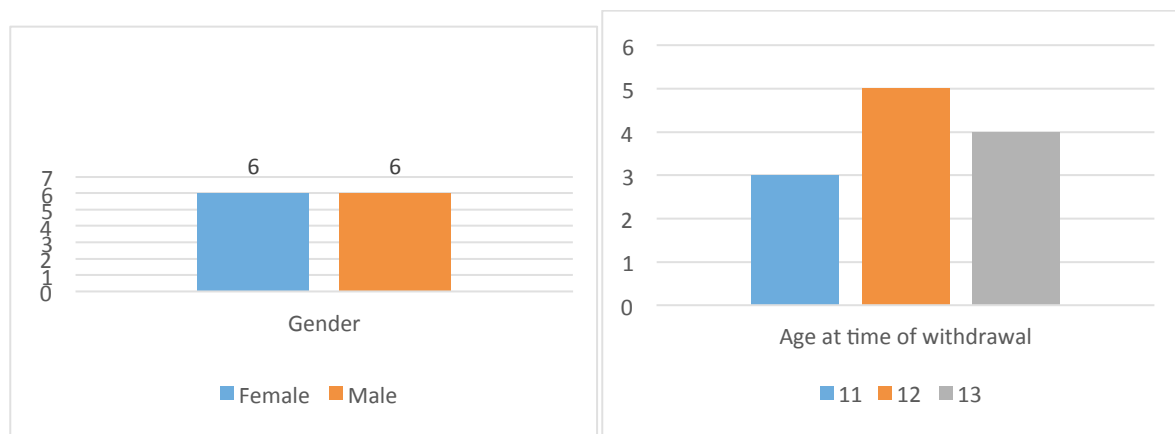
We are proud of this high retention rate and believe it underscores the long-term commitment students make to playing an instrument in Neighborhood Strings, as well as the strength of the ongoing teacher-student relationships and the bond in the student community around music-making.

We looked at the reasons for withdrawal for each student. “Circumstances beyond child/family control” could include reasons like the need to care for a sibling or other relative during program times or transportation difficulties. “Other interests” included students who chose sports or other conflicting activities over Neighborhood Strings.

Reasons for withdrawing

Circumstances beyond child/family control	6	21%
Other interests	12	43%
Moved away	10	36%

Finally, we looked at the gender and age of those students who withdrew voluntarily due to other interests.



- 50% of students who withdrew voluntarily were male and 50% were female.
- 100% of students who withdrew voluntarily were ages 11-13, with the most common age being 12.



Music and Academics

Many contemporary studies show how music education encourages learning in all areas. We work with school officials to collect academic information on Neighborhood Strings students to track how participants in the program perform at school, as well as looking at attendance rates. Results show the Neighborhood Strings students performing well above the school average. For example, at Woodland Academy in 2015-16, 90% of Neighborhood Strings students performed at or above reading level for their grades, while only 62% of students overall at the school reached that mark. Similarly, 80% Neighborhood Strings students had only 5 or fewer absences, whereas in the overall school population only 60% of students reached that goal. We are well aware that many factors contribute to this correlation, and many of our students were already academically strong coming in to the program. Nonetheless, we are proud that our participants are positive contributors to the school community.

CHALLENGES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

I. Retention

Challenges

After five years, 62% of students enrolled during the first five years are still in the program. We continue to seek ways to improve this retention rate. We have no control over students/families who move away, but would hope to improve the retention rate of all other students.

Recommendations

- We believe that more frequent contact with students would benefit students musically, and build an even stronger bond between students and staff. Therefore, we will investigate the possibility of daily instruction periods. Students would benefit from increased opportunities to share their musical skills with each other, building self-esteem and confidence.
- Parents could be asked to make a commitment to provide a safe, quiet location for their child's practice routine.
- The "NS Club", our teen leadership group could be more fully utilized to better support students who may be considering ending their involvement in Neighborhood Strings.
- We recommend an increase in the program fee to \$100 per student by 2020, beginning with \$50 in 2017-2018. Having a little "skin in the game" could result in positive parental pressure on the student to attend the program regularly, to practice, and to care for the instrument on loan. We realize this may be a hardship for some families and will stress to everyone that our program is open to all and the fee will be waived for those who cannot afford to pay.



II. Communication

Challenges

Better communication between all stakeholders would benefit all involved with Neighborhood Strings.

Recommendations

- Expansion of parent involvement would strengthen the level of communication between students, staff and home.
- Provide a calendar of events at the beginning of the year to both parents and school administrators.
- Email and Snail mail flyers 2 weeks in advance of all events.

III. Financial Resources

Challenges

The cost of offering All-Play Day, private lessons for every student, and instrument rentals makes this an expensive program to run. Due to the increased demand from other social and cultural nonprofits, local foundations are stretched thin. Therefore, we see financial sustainability our greatest challenge.

Recommendations

- Continue to pursue regional and national funding (Massachusetts Cultural Council, NEA grants, other national funders).
- Increase individual donors through Major Gift campaigns by identifying those who are invested in, or have a passion for arts education.
- Bi-annual Gala Fundraising events – our Fiesta gala was a wonderful “feel good” event that raised both money and awareness of our program.

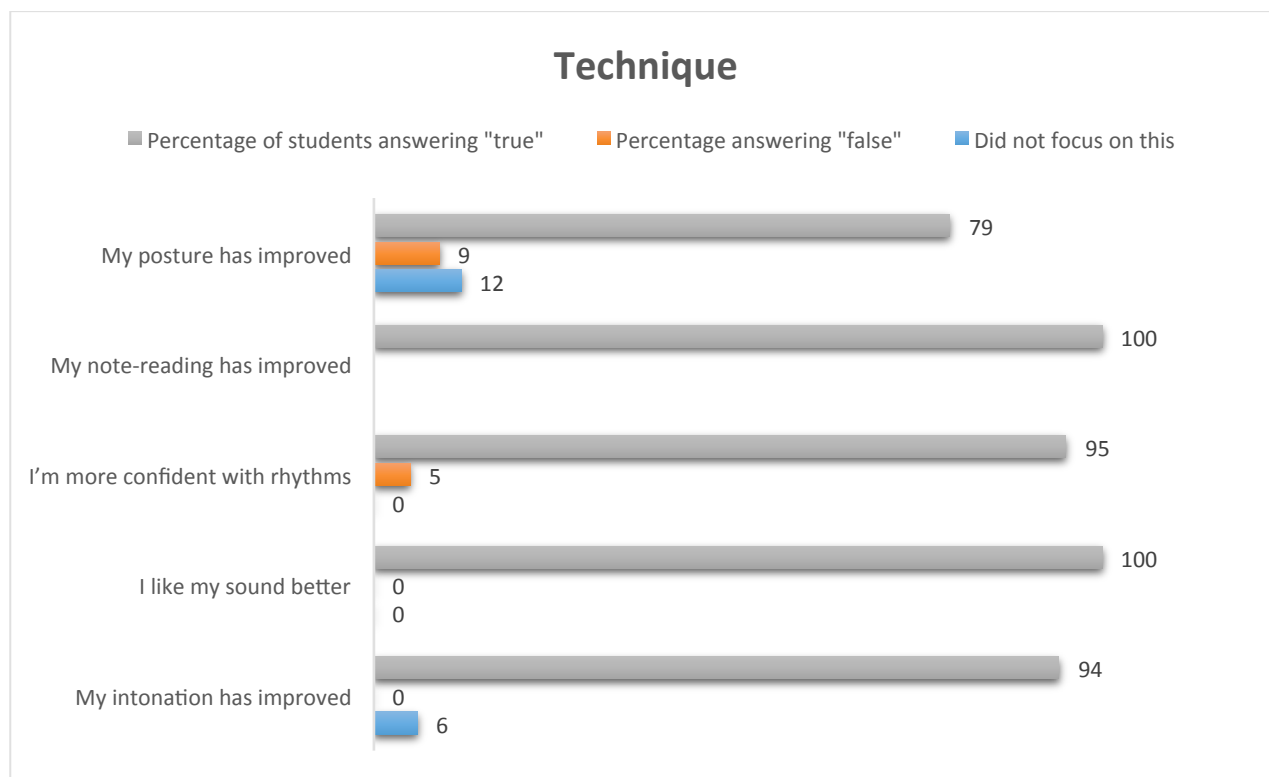


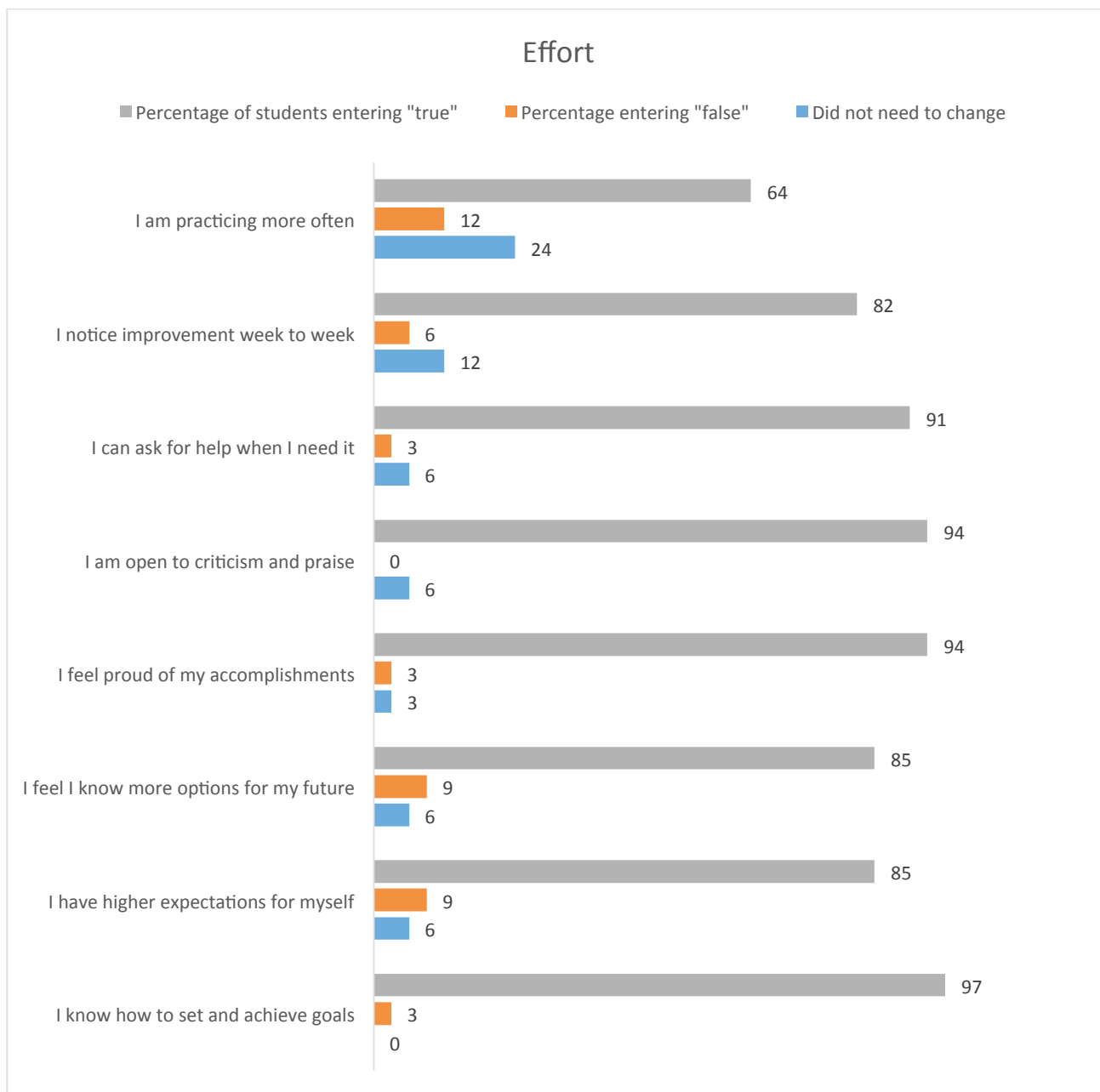
ADDENDUM

Evaluations over the Five-Year Period

Student and parent evaluation data collected over five years have remained relatively consistent over the period. For example, student responses to the question, "I understand how music can connect me more to my community," have remained between 90%-100% "yes" between 2013 and 2017. Similarly, student responses to the question, "I feel I know more options for my future" have remained between 80% and 90% positives over the same period. Most responses have remained within a 10 to 15% response range over five years. Student narrative responses were more detailed (several sentences instead of just 1 or 2) in 2017, likely because more students worked one-on-one with adult mentors to respond to the evaluation questions. One question to pursue in the next several years is whether students who are more engaged with the program--for example, teen members of the NS club, who have an extra session each week, plus additional performances--see deeper and more lasting changes in their lives.

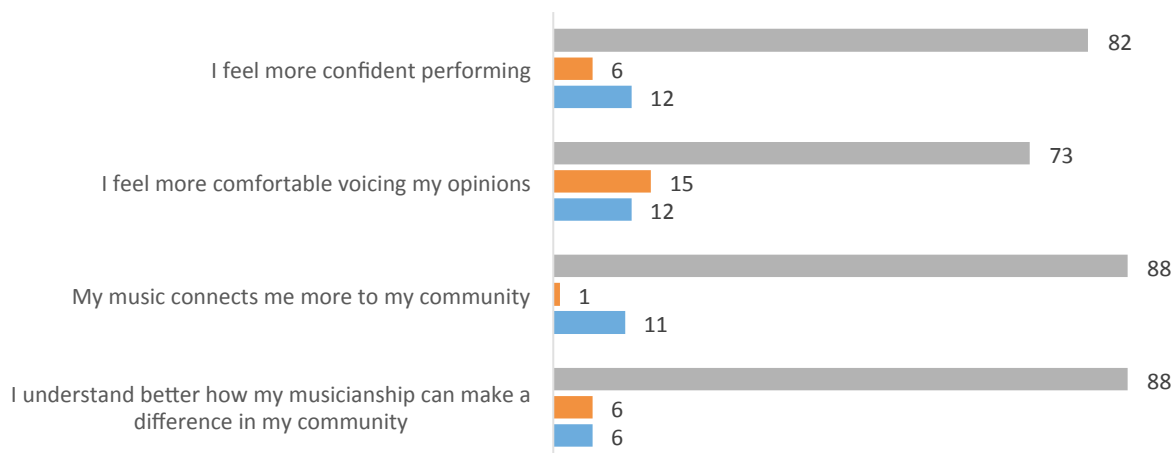
Student Evaluation responses





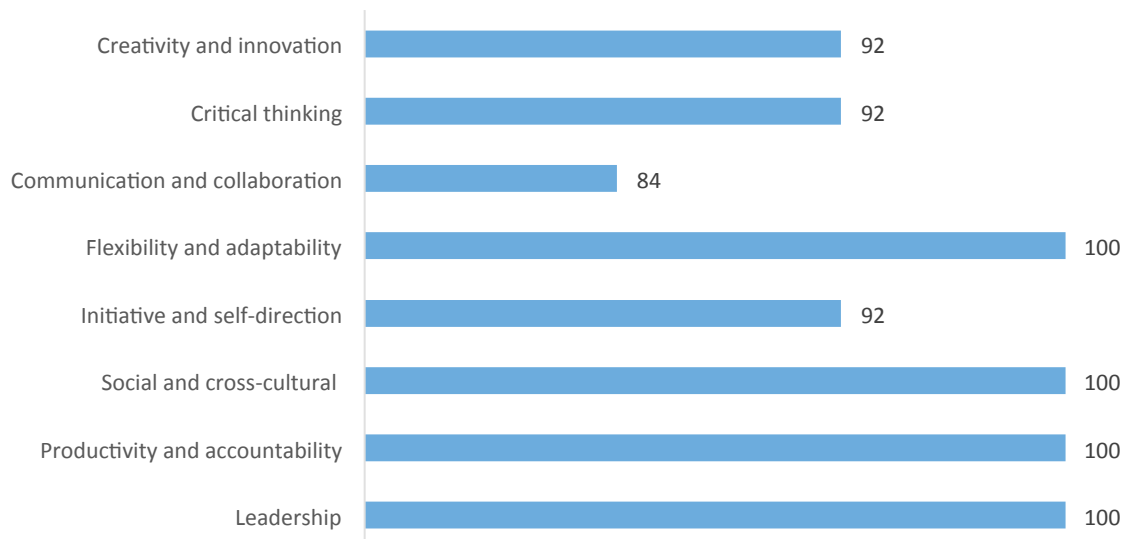
Artistry

■ Percentage of students entering "true" ■ Percentage entering "false" ■ Didn't need to change



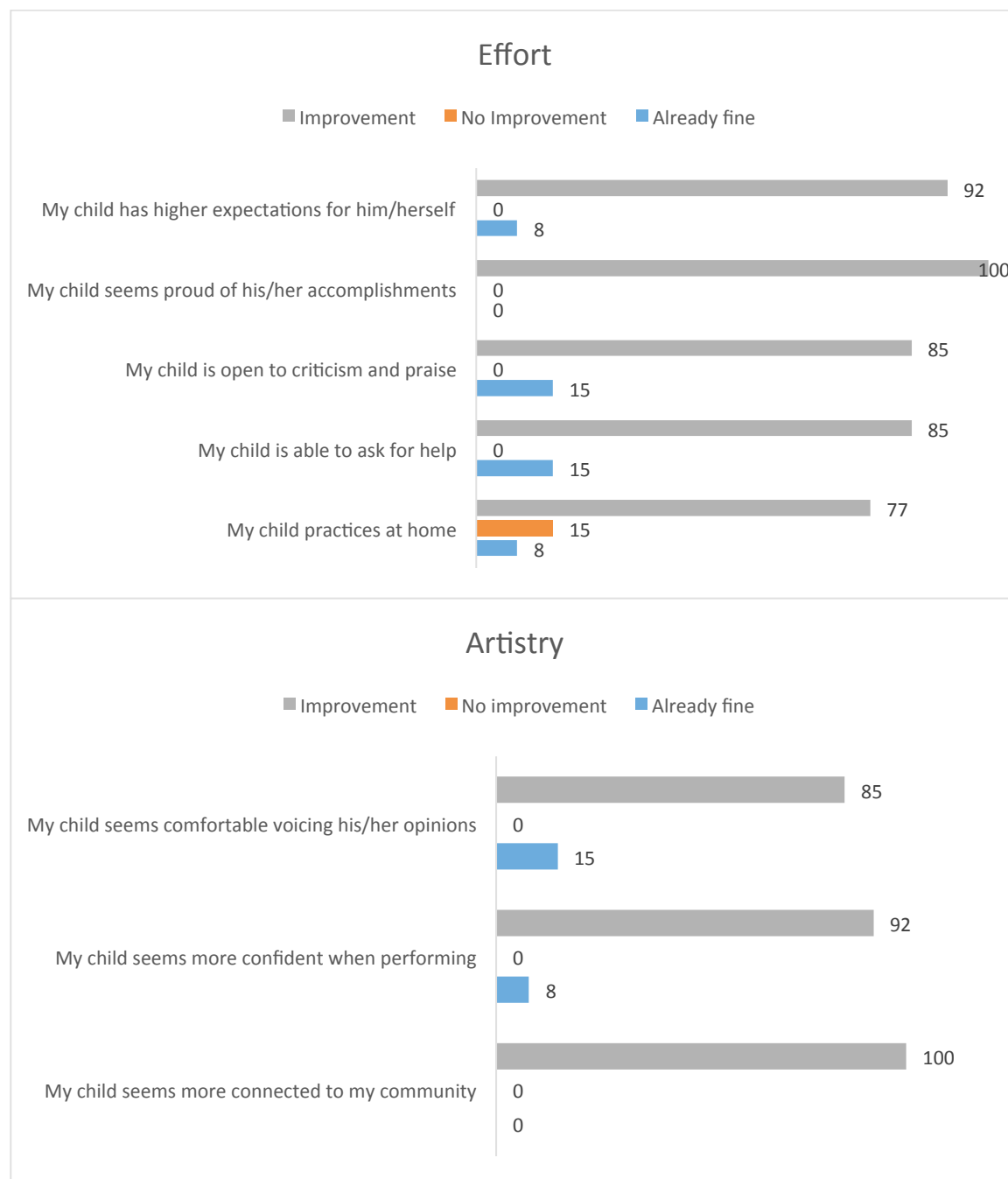
Skills Neighborhood Strings has helped students develop

■ Percentage of students choosing this skill (students may select multiple skills)





Parent Evaluation Responses





Neighborhood Strings Logic Model

