



Vocal Point, an award-winning a cappella group from Gale-Ettrick-Trempealeau High School, performs at a recent show.



SMALL but MIGHTY

How small school districts are finding
big success in the performing arts

Nancy Rogers &
Shelby Anderson

The list of benefits that students get from participating in the performing arts is well known — self-confidence, risk-taking, engagement. Well-documented research has also reiterated the developmental benefits students get from music, including brain development and listening skills.

Every school district wants this for their students. This article features three successful performing arts programs in smaller school districts located across the state. While they found success in their

own way, each program thrives because of support from district staff, their communities and the students themselves.

■ G-E-T's Vocal Point

How does a small school district, like the Gale-Ettrick-Trempealeau School District (G-E-T), with only 1,400 students develop strong performing arts programs? There are many factors that can be attributed to the success but dedicated teachers and coaches who get to know the students on a personal level seem to be the main factor. These teachers and coaches create an array of communities for students where they can gain a sense of connection to the district.

“A connection to school beyond

the required academics is extremely important for students,” said district administrator Aaron Engel. “It creates engagement and a sense of belonging that leads to better socio-emotional health and a greater likelihood of graduation. It also teaches responsibility and allows students to investigate interests the general curriculum cannot provide.”

G-E-T, a small consolidated school district near the Mississippi River, has long held artistic expression in high regard. The strong vocal, instrumental, theatre, and visual art programs have performed at the highest levels of competition with exemplary results.

Ryan Stuemppes, head of the high school vocal program, gives this bit of advice to his students, “Just because you come from a small school, doesn't mean you can't do big things.”



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— Aaron Engel, District Administrator for the
Gale-Ettrick-Trempealeau School District



G-E-T High School's a cappella group, Vocal Point, took Stuemppes at his word by singing their way to the national level. Last year, Vocal Point took third place at the International Championship of High School A Cappella (ICHSA) in New York City. Vocal Point was the smallest public high school ever to compete at the finals.

Finishing in the top three, Vocal Point performed at the historic Beacon Theatre in New York City to an audience of more than 3,000. G-E-T's Ethan Giles was awarded

best vocal percussionist of the year by the ICHSA.

Wisconsin school leaders might remember Vocal Point from their impressive performance at the 2014 State Education Convention.

This school year, Vocal Point has continued to represent the small school district on a big stage. They have sung with UW-Madison's all-male a cappella group Fundamentally Sound. They have performed in a concert and festival at the Civic Center in Rochester, Minnesota. And, most notably, in

August, the group opened up for country singer Gavin Degraw and sang in front of 15,000 people.

While the success has been fun, Stuemppes says it requires a lot of work and dedication from the students. "Being a member of Vocal Point takes a great understanding of commitment, work ethic, and practice," he said. "The members understand that things just don't happen in life, you have to work for what you want."

Stuemppes added that students learn life lessons by participating in extra-curricular groups like Vocal Point.

"It teaches so much more than just music," he said. "I know that 10 years down the road most of my students won't remember every note or song, but I know they will remember the process that led them to their success."

Vocal Point will once again be competing in the International Championship of High School A Cappella. Their first quarter final will be held in Osseo on Feb. 10 at 7 pm. Tickets will be on sale in January at varsityvocals.com.



Vocal Point will be performing Feb. 10 in Osseo in the quarterfinals of the International Championship of High School A Cappella.

■ A Grand Venue in Chilton

During the 2003-04 school year, the Chilton Public School District passed a referendum that allowed it to build a state-of-the-art performing arts center. The Engler Center for the Performing Arts seats 735 and is outfitted with the kind of multi-media systems used in world-renowned theaters. More than 13 years later, the venue is still benefiting the school district and community.

“Our students are proud of their facility and what it allows them to do. They are aware that not every school, especially ones the size of Chilton, are blessed with facilities like ours,” said choir director Joy Paffenroth. “They take great care of it and respect what it does for them.”

Paffenroth, who teaches grades 6-12 choir and general music, has seen the benefits and opportunities that a strong performing arts program has on students. Some of these opportunities have included musical theater productions at the middle school and high school levels, trips to various parts of the U.S., singing on a local television news program during the holiday season, various community performance opportunities, and, among others, participation in statewide festivals and all-state ensembles.

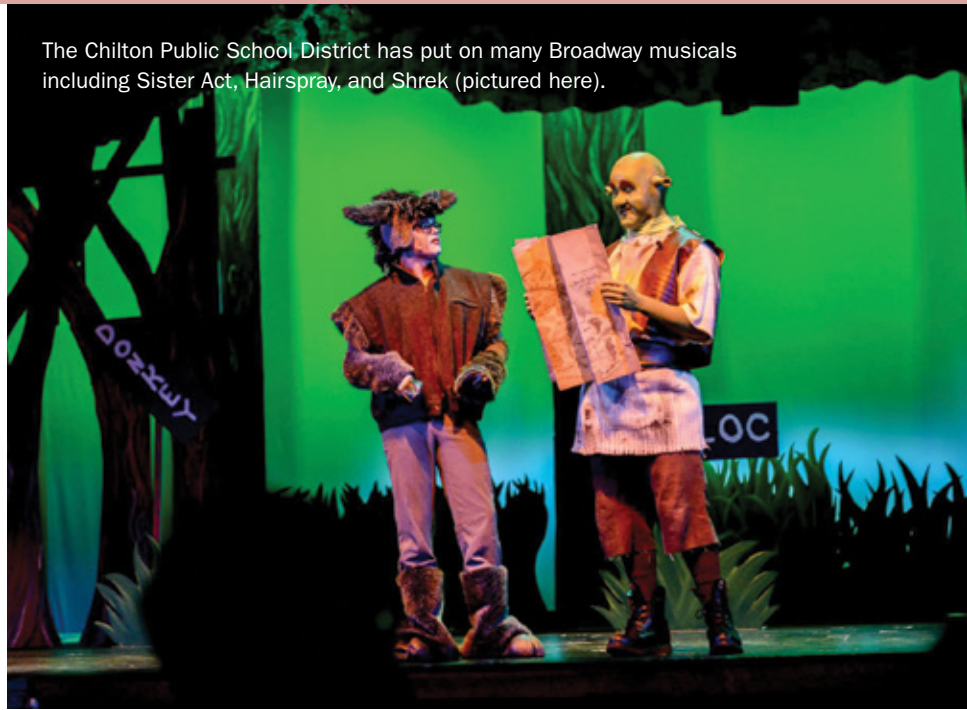
Paffenroth said that participating in extra-curricular activities like choir, band or theater can help challenge students in new ways.

“I believe when students are given opportunities, they will rise to the occasion and find success,” Paffenroth said. “Once they find success and feel good about what they are doing, they will push themselves farther and they will bring others on board to join in the success.”

Among other things, the Engler Center has allowed the musical theater program at Chilton to flourish. The high school has put on shows such as *Sister Act*, *Hairspray* and other Broadway hits.

While the venue has played an important role in the success of the district’s performing arts, Paffenroth

The Chilton Public School District has put on many Broadway musicals including *Sister Act*, *Hairspray*, and *Shrek* (pictured here).



emphasizes that what makes the difference is the people that bring the arts alive within the center.

“This includes the dedicated teachers, staff and community members who donate their time and talents to create the opportunities,” she said. “It also includes the students who put in the work as well.”

Paffenroth said the work and dedication needed from students to

put on a large-scale production builds skills and pushes students outside their comfort zones.

“Music and musical theater have so many benefits for those who participate — confidence-building, community, perseverance, attention to detail, risk-taking,” she said. “These benefits may not be able to be measured on a standardized test, but they will be felt for their entire lives.”

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The Baldwin-Woodville High School marching band has won the WSMA State Marching Band Championships the last two years.



■ The Benefits of Marching Band

For the second year in a row, the Baldwin-Woodville High School marching band took first place in class A of the Wisconsin School Music Association (WSMA) State Marching Band Championships. The school's marching band is perenni-

ally in contention for first place among other strong marching bands from school districts including Cumberland, Portage and Columbus.

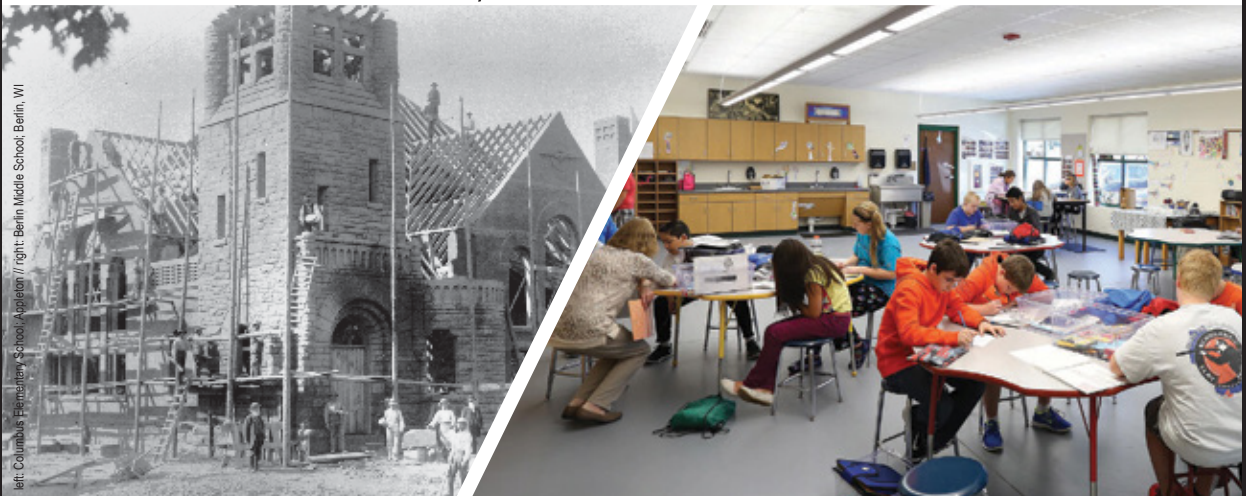
Adam Bassak, marching band director at Baldwin-Woodville High School, said, unlike other school activities, any student who is interested can participate in marching band.

“We do not have a varsity or junior varsity,” he said. “Our marching program includes students in grades 9-12, so there is a wide variety of experience and ability levels. Yet, by the end of the season, they are all performing on nearly the same level. This is due to great student leadership and student desire to improve.”

The marching band program begins at the start of each school year, which Bassak said, is ideal because the program builds connections and friendships. “In the end, students will not remember scores or placements, but rather that feeling of accomplishing something great as a group,” he said. “The feeling of knowing the work you put in paid off, as they had their best show of the year.”

Bassak said marching band teaches so many other important life lessons to students including; musicianship, leadership, time management,

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organization, friendship, patience, coordination, hard work, etc.

“These lessons help students in the classroom, the workplace, as they apply to college, and a variety of other activities they may be part of,” he said. “The combination of physical, mental, and emotional effort that is put in to each rehearsal and show defines a student. Through tradition, excellence, desire and passion, we continue to grow and evolve.”

The success of the program is thanks to the students, of course, but Bassak also thanks the district’s staff and parents for their support. In addition, Bassak said the community support of the arts in the school district has been incredible.

“To me, that is the beauty of a smaller, tight-knit community,” he said. “Concerts, competitions, pep bands, musicals, etc. are all well attended, and the response from the audience is always appreciated.”



“I think pride in your school and community is important,” Bassak added. “I want kids to be involved in as many extra-curricular activities as possible. The stronger the pride they feel for our community, the stronger our group is through unity and community support.”

If anyone has questions about

starting a marching band program, or participating in WSMA local and state shows, you can contact Adam Bassak at abassak@bwsd.k12.wi.us or visit WSMA.org. ■

Nancy Rogers is a member of the Gale-Etrick-Trempealeau School Board.

Shelby Anderson is editor of Wisconsin School News.

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