

Hitting a high note

Montgomery County Schools honored with KSBA PEAK Award



Photos provided by Montgomery County Schools

The Montgomery County High School orchestra plays at the Montgomery County Schools Employee Appreciation Dinner. The orchestra is one of many musical activities students throughout the district may participate in.

By Jennifer Wohlleb
Staff Writer

When budget cuts and the economic downturn forced some school districts to cut or reduce “extras,” like the arts, Montgomery County Schools found a way to increase opportunities for music education at all grade levels.

“This, to us, is as important in the psychosocial development of students as anything,” said Superintendent Dr. Joshua Powell. “We want to not only keep this, but expand these types of programs in our district. And rather than diminish our services to kids, we’ve increased them.”

Montgomery County Schools’ K-12 music program is the winner of the spring KSBA Public Education Achieves in Kentucky Award. The PEAK Award, given twice yearly, was established in 1997 to focus statewide attention on outstanding public school efforts that enhance student learning skills and promote the positive impact of public elementary and secondary education in Kentucky.

“The Montgomery County Board of Education’s commitment to music education is inspiring,” said PEAK judge and Russellville Independent Schools board and KSBA Board of Directors member Davonna Page. “It is evident that the students in the Montgomery County Schools have benefitted not only by acquiring musical skills, but in their academic skills as well.”

The district’s music program includes at least one full-time certified music teacher at each school, which means every

student has the opportunity for some instruction. More than 1,000 students districtwide participate in a performance ensemble. Montgomery County Intermediate School provides general music instruction to students, who all can participate in orchestra, band or choir. McNabb Middle School also offers band, chorus, orchestra, as well as general music, piano and guitar classes, jazz ensemble and musical theater. District officials said since 2006, more than 50 percent of the school’s students have been a part of a performance group.

Montgomery County High School has three concert bands, multiple chorus groups, two orchestras and jazz and percussion ensembles, as well as classes in music theory, jazz improvisation and a dual-credit course in music history.

The district hasn’t cut back in these areas despite the tough economic times, because they offer a number of benefits to students.

“We often hear that sometimes participating in band, orchestra, chorus, may be the one thing that keeps that student in school, that’s the thing they come to school for, to be part of something and those music teachers make a connection with those students,” said Jacqui Johnston, district chief administrative officer.

Powell attributes at least some of the district’s increase in test scores in the past few years – from 132nd in the state to 29th – to the success of the music programs.

“It helps the overall development of kids. These are hands-

on, expressive-type activities that just give students another way to develop,” he said. “It also develops another part of the brain. This is as important as reading, arithmetic, all that.”

“Sometimes, we as public educators, if it’s not required, we don’t have any or much of it. It’s important for us as educators to view the mandates of public education as the bare minimum of expectations and this is a way that we can exceed those expectations and do what’s right.”

Multiple funding sources support the programs, but district officials credit the school board for making sure these programs have what they need.

“I’m proud that we can offer what we do and have such a large number of participants among our students,” said board member Donna Wilson. “For our size school system and for being a rural community, I think we achieve a lot. It meets the needs of those students who have talents in that area and gives them the opportunity to explore the different avenues in the fine arts area so they can see if it’s something they want to pursue in college or as a career.”

Wilson said it even provides nonmusically inclined students a chance to shine through some of the productions staged each year at the middle and high schools.

“Our directors use students who come in and work the lights, the sound, the stage crew,” she said. “We’re getting a lot of different experiences where you can reach out into the schools and attract students who have different types of talent to work into a fine arts program.”

Powell said credit for the success of these programs lies with the educators.

“We have incredibly passionate people leading these programs with kids, and that is the success of this program,” he said.

Ashley Tyree, director of vocal music at the high school, said in the past five years, some graduates have continued their music education at more than 20 different universities, including the New England Conservatory, Manhattan School of Music, the Cincinnati Conservatory, NYU and Loyola. He said these students also have excelled academically.

“They have scored consistently above the college entrance exam benchmarks since all juniors have been required to take the ACT,” he wrote in his recommendation of the program. “Prior to that, 80 percent of music students scored proficient or distinguished on at least one of the CATS/K-Prep tests.”

Parent Tammy Haydon said the district’s music programs have been invaluable to her two children, both in high school this year.

“All of these musical opportunities have allowed my children to hone their critical thinking skills (through acquiring the skills necessary to read and understand musical notation and direction), and they’ve helped to make them well-rounded individuals, leaders, and ‘team’ players,” she wrote. “Both have always been successful academically, and I think that the opportunities offered by the Montgomery County music program have played a major role in this success.”

– The deadline for entering the next PEAK Award cycle is Oct. 3. For more information, go to www.ksba.org/PEAK.



Students at Montgomery County High School performing in the musical, *Anything Goes*. The school puts on an annual production, providing students not only the opportunity to sing and play instruments, but be part of the stage, set and program design crew.