

# The Australian

---

## Performing arts instrumental in school success

- by: Justine Ferrari
- From: The Australian
- December 17, 2011 12:00AM



Year 6 student Nakier Chol with fellow students and principal Mary Lawrey at Melbourne's Sacred Heart Primary School in Fitzroy. Picture: Aaron Francis

Source: The Australian

### **TEACHING the performing arts in primary schools significantly boosts the results disadvantaged students achieve in academic subjects.**

An independent evaluation of an arts program taught in disadvantaged schools found student grades in English, maths, science and studies of human society rose significantly compared with similar schools with no arts classes. And in national literacy tests, the proportion of Year 5 students meeting minimum standards in reading rose to 90 per cent compared with about 65 per cent in the non-arts schools.

The report by international education consultant and Melbourne University professorial fellow Brian Caldwell examined the effects of programs run by the Song Room, a non-profit organisation that provides teaching artists to schools who otherwise could not provide arts classes.

Professor Caldwell, a former dean of education at Melbourne, said he had not expected to find much difference in results, given the Song Room usually provides only one hour of lessons a week.

But he said participating in the program led to a rise in the national literacy tests that was the equivalent of having an extra year of school. "I was astonished. It's extraordinary," he said.

"It has enormous policy implications for the millions and millions of dollars being spent on programs to help

boost literacy when an intervention like this has that impact."

The report found that attendance soared on days when arts classes were held, and that children's emotional and social wellbeing, particularly their resilience, rose significantly.

Sacred Heart Primary School in Fitzroy has worked with the Song Room organisation for the past four years, running its singing, dance, drumming and percussion programs.

This year, the school joined the pilot of a program teaching string instruments, with about 60 students from Years 4 to 6, like Nakier Chol, learning violin and cello. "People were very doubtful at the beginning of the year that some of our kids would be able to sit still and play a violin, or sit with a group and play in a group," principal Mary Lawrey said.

At the end-of-year concert a couple of weeks ago, the students not only sat still and played their instruments, but performed their own compositions created in class and individually.

"Our kids have learnt how to behave in different situations, how to behave as an audience, as a performer, and how to enjoy all of those," she said. "It teaches them self-management skills, builds their concentration and how to work in a group, and builds their self-esteem."

About 96 per cent of the school's students come from the neighbouring housing estates, with the vast majority being refugees from Vietnam, China or Africa, and few of them speaking English at home.

Ms Lawrey said the strings program was the only opportunity the students had to learn a musical instrument, because their parents were mostly unable to afford to buy an instrument or pay for lessons.

Professor Caldwell said it was of concern that the arts were often sidelined by schools, particularly with the unrelenting focus on literacy and numeracy, with an estimated 700,000 primary students across the nation missing out on any arts education.

---