

Student Experience with Rock and Roll Academy

South Tech Academy
Boynton Beach, Florida



South Tech Academy (STA), a vocational technical charter school serving students 9th through 12th grade, is located in Boynton Beach, Florida. The school serves 1,114 students, 56% female & 44% male, with 78% of the students receiving free and reduced lunch, and 87% of the population being minority. A large percentage of students at (STA) have experienced homelessness, and a majority of students have after school jobs in order to support themselves, and their families.

South Tech Academy Charter school president, Mr. Jim Kidd, founded the school and saw the need for a program like Rock and Roll Academy (RRA), in order to create a culture of acceptance and inclusion of all students. Mr. Kidd visited the original RRA in Telluride, CO and immediately recognized the impact this program could have on the students of STA.

As a young man, Mr. Kidd learned how to play guitar, finding a sense of belonging and acceptance through music. Mr. Kidd wanted to bring this opportunity, to find a sense of belonging and community through music, to his students at STA. In a program like RRA, the instructor is important in delivering the full impact of the program, as they set the tone of the shared learning environment. Recognizing the importance of the right teacher, Mr. Kidd brought Sandi Hagood, musician and teacher, onboard to launch RRA at STA.

Sandi Hagood, lead facilitator at South Tech RRA, reported “Our program is so diverse. And it works. If it works here, and with our students, it will work anywhere. Many of the students participating in RRA have been diagnosed with a disability and find other classes to be a challenge. This class does not present a problem for those students, these are the kids that get the meaning and purpose of this class the most. They excel in music appreciation and aren’t treated as different. The other kids welcome them into their circle and as part of the RRA community”.

Shawna Kingsley-Scott, Exceptional Student Education Specialist, stated, “We’ve had a lot of our students with an IEP and special needs come through the program and it really has helped them to blossom and brought them out of

their shell. Especially our autism population. Kids that would have social inadequacies have been able to foster relationships that normally would not have been there. The social aspect of them being able to go outside what their norm and their typical is and really reaching further? That’s the hugest thing.”

In many classes, student attendance impacts grades and overall school experience. RRA classes are designed to impact a student’s *desire to attend school* by aligning attendance with the sense of belonging that comes from being part of a peer-driven learning model. Being included in a band naturally promotes regular attendance as *each student’s success depends on their band mates being there*. The sense of responsibility students feel toward each other as members of the same band creates a natural form of accountability

This culture of inclusion and responsibility begins in the middle school, South Tech Prep, where their RRA program feeds into the high school program. Brandon Stair, RRA Facilitator at the middle school, stated, “It’s liberating to switch to a program like Rock and Roll Academy and remove some of the burden of the teacher owning all the success of the classroom. Having students own some of the responsibility for things going well and being successful results in 9 out of 10 kids resolving problems on their own, as the RRA model is designed to do – encouraging students to find creative solutions to their own problems.”

Closely reflecting Brandon’s comments about transitioning from a traditional classroom model to a shared learning environment, STA RRA facilitator Katarina Emilcar, who holds a Masters in Piano Performance, said, “I would say it was liberating. It’s not me talking the whole time, it’s not me trying to teach everyone at once. It is actually reaching the kids and then, let them be. Just to take a step away, seeing when they need you, and then helping them. And really just think about the kids. How can I help them? How can I reach the different personalities?”

Basic Overview of RRA Program

RRA's social emotional learning, music-based program, designed to develop communication & relationship skills, cultural & social acceptance, autonomy and self-expression is provided to students either as an academy, or an elective. Instruments in the program include: electric guitar, keyboard, drums, bass guitar, vocals with microphone, drum machine, and beat making software. There is also a recording studio component of the program.

The facilitated hands-on learning experience consists of moving through the 18 Units of the RRA Learning Cycle. Provided here is an overview of the first 5 Units:

1. **Set Up an Atmosphere:** Social emotional strategies to establish boundaries, trust, listening, unconditional love; components that make up a *Shared Learning Environment*.
2. **Explore the Space:** Through guided Free Play students develop confidence and autonomy, exploring what it is to be in an environment of acceptance while being allowed to play new instruments. This is also an exploration of social dynamics and trust.
3. **The Band Is Your Teacher:** As students play instruments with each other, observe each other, and feed off their own social energy, leaders emerge (often through humorous attempts at singing or playing) and a learning context—a band—is formed.
4. **Making Choices:** Participants select a song and, once chosen, choose instruments for that song. Direct instrumental instruction follows these choices, empowering students.
5. **Get the Song In The Room:** Staying connected to the emotion of the student-chosen song, the song plays continuously while the trainer moves about the room showing the simplest part on each instrument allowing students to participate in the band immediately.

Direct instruction on the instruments follows the social process, play, exploration, and sense of ownership students demonstrate. Students are first taught simple parts that enable them to immediately play along with the group. More advanced techniques are introduced as time progresses. RRA holds that it is initially more important for students—who

may not have had success in previous class settings—to *participate and play*, than it is for them to play *correctly*.

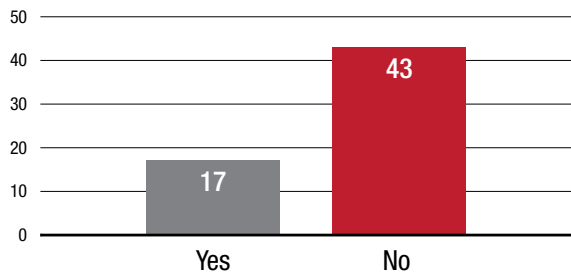
At STA, the program was initially setup as an elective, with students encouraged to participate. The program has been in place at STA for 6 years and is now offered as an elective and an academy. The expansion of the program was made due to positive changes in behavior, attendance, and overall eagerness to participate in RRA. Students enjoy the culture and choices within boundaries approach to learning. Mr. Kidd reported having seen kids who could barely speak in public, and in 3 weeks, that same shy kid, was singing in front of their class. Mr. Kidd observed, “There are very few behavior issues at STA. RRA is a major cog in the STA machine, it emphasizes students being inclusive, respecting one another, and finding another space in this school where they are accepted”.

Proving the impacts of RRA, South Tech Academy shared three years of student attendance, and grades (while removing student names, ID's, and birthdays). The three years of data highlighted the importance of RRA, as the average student absentee rate went down over the three years, initially with students ranging from 1 to 18 days of missed school in a quarter, to a current average of 1-2 missed days of school, per quarter, with a large number of students missing zero days.

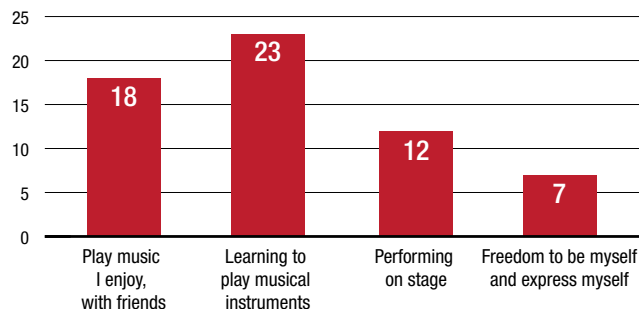
It's important to note, this school is primarily comprised of students who have after school employment. Meaning, they are often working late and have other responsibilities, that would make it easy to be tardy or absent from school. As reported by several students, classes like RRA make it more enticing to come to school because it is not an experience they can get anywhere else. It is not surprising that with increased attendance, the students also had higher grades, in both RRA and other academic classes.

Students were asked to complete a survey in February of 2019, to assess how they viewed the class. Overall, the students reported their participation in Rock and Roll Academy as having impacted their ability to feel included, have a community that they belong to, and impact their mood and behavior, in a positive way, outside of the RRA classroom.

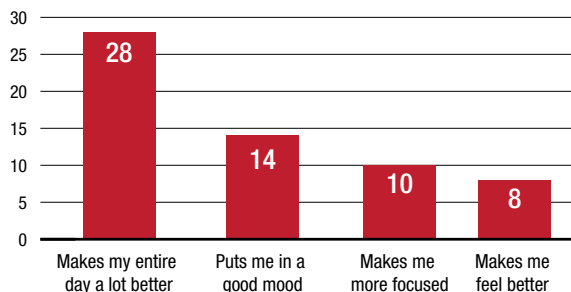
Before Rock and Roll Academy, did you have any music experience?



What's your favorite part of RRA?



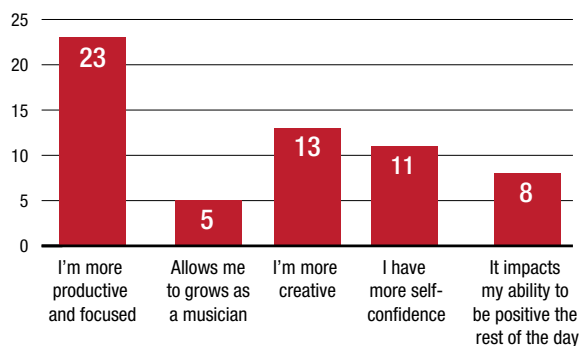
How do you think having music as part of your day, impacts the rest of your day?



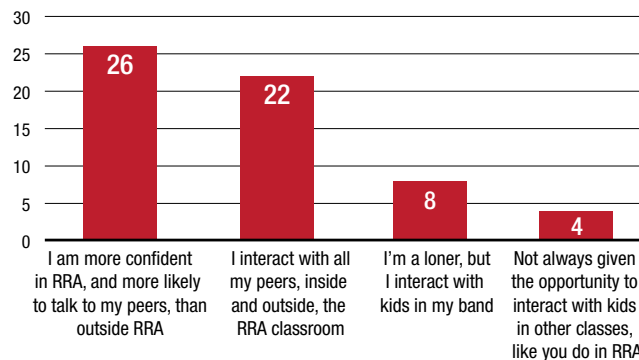
How would you describe the RRA classroom?



What other benefits do you think having time in your day to be creative produces?



When participating in RRA, do you typically interact only with preferred classmates, or with the entire class? How does this differ from how you engage with peers outside of RRA?



Conclusion

The charts above illustrate the importance of a program like RRA, with 72% of the students participating in the survey having no exposure to instruments, prior to the program. Many of the students reported simply having access to instruments, something they believed only available to more affluent schools, made coming to school more enticing, and provided them with something to look forward to. The majority of students reported that RRA makes them more focused, helps them have a better outlook on their day, and makes them feel better about themselves. Students overwhelmingly reported that having a creative outlet, like RRA, allowed them to manage their feelings and be a better community member, not just in the RRA classroom, but other classes as well.

Overall, this program highlights the outcomes that are possible through delivering an effective social emotional learning, music-based curriculum in a classroom setting, serving students from a very diverse background. Improved student attendance, and the overall perception students have of themselves and their ability to be part of a community, highlight the significant role this program plays in a school over time.

