

SCHOOL MATTERS

Palo Alto public schools brim with music

If you attended the Palo Alto May Fete parade, you probably heard several high school and middle school bands play. That makes sense, since 4,500 Palo Alto school children take music each year. All students receive music instruction in first- through sixth grade. In fifth grade, they can choose an instrument, and all sixth-graders perform either in a band, orchestra or choir.

There are 26 music instructors in the Palo Alto Unified School District, many of whom "float" from school to school, teaching. And what gets them really excited are the California Music Educators Association festivals. These events occur at the same places every year, spread out so no one has to travel

too far. Gunn High School hosts an annual band (wind and percussion instrument) festival — this year's event took place April 24-25 and featured 30 schools, including Palo Alto High School.

Todd Summers, the band director at Gunn, and Sandra Lewis, the orchestra director at Gunn, run a really good festival, Palo Alto Unified Music Coordinator Nancy Coffey said.

"It's kind of like a STAR test for music," Coffey said. "When we prepare for the festivals, we work really hard to fine-tune everything."

Music festivals are similar to



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Coffey said.

Another feature of the festivals is sight-reading, where students play a piece of music they've never seen before and a director talks to them for two minutes before they play it. Coffey

says sight-reading is a key skill for a musician to master. Instructors pick pieces of music that present a challenge for their ensembles, three judges give comment, and the 15-minute performances are recorded and replayed for the students the next day.

"It's kind of like a sports tournament, except nobody loses and everybody learns," Coffey said.

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"If they can't read fluently," she said, "they can't play in ensembles."

Lewis, the Gunn orchestra director, is particularly proud that her students — in band and orchestra — are excellent sight-readers.

Palo Alto seventh-graders may continue with music or choose to spend their time on different electives, including industrial arts or language.

"About 45 percent of the kids in Palo Alto are taking music of some sort, including choir, after seventh-grade. That's extraordinary," said Coffey,

noting that in other districts, only 20 percent of students continue to take

music after the seventh-grade.

Local student musicians are slated to play several concerts this month and in June. Coffey intends to post the dates and times on the PTA Council Web site (<http://paloaltopta.org>) and on the general information Web site hosted by the Sixth District PTA (info.paloaltopta.org/parent_cd.shtml#quick).

School Matters is happy to hear your feedback. Please e-mail any comments to schoolmatters@paloaltopta.org to reach Preeva Tramiel, who is writing the column this year. Look on the PTA Council Web site, www.paloaltopta.org, and pull down the leftmost menu, and click on "school matters" to see submission guidelines for press releases.