

A change in tempo

Orchestra directors' workload increases as they are required to take over Lamar program

INGRID SMITH

co-online managing editor,
co-news editor

As a result of AISD's budget crisis, the nationally recognized orchestra faces a challenge it hasn't encountered in more than 20 years: sharing its directors and resources with another school.

In the frenzy of an unavoidable 9% faculty cut at the end of last school year, fine arts programs had to make sacrifices.

For example, assistant orchestra director Erika Elder was slated to move to Lamar Middle School. Orchestra directors Ricky Pringle and Elder knew the resulting cuts to orchestra classes would be drastic and impossible, so they decided to split Lamar Middle School's four orchestras between themselves and continue sharing the responsibility for directing the McCallum orchestra.

"It's definitely scary," Elder said. "It is going to be literally twice the amount of work because we're trying to keep everything here at McCallum as similar as we can, while also picking up a second program. But we want to make it work."

For Pringle and Elder, this shift will mean taking on double the students, double the concerts and double the travel time. For McCallum orchestra students, it means less time with the directors, schedule changes, cut and condensed specialized instrument classes and differences in the structure of orchestra classes.

"I don't think it's fair to the kids," Pringle said. "I don't think it's fair to a lot of the parents who drive their kids all the way here for the specific things that we offer. Are we about to become the McCallum-Lamar orchestra program just as one? I hope not. I will try to keep it as separate as possible. But we can only do so much."

The cause

Fine Arts Academy Director Gabe Reyes said that while he and Principal Nicole Griffith will always advocate for the Fine Arts Academy, they have a responsibility to adhere to the budget. According to Reyes, for Pringle and Elder to return to McCallum full-time, orchestra and Fine Arts Academy enrollment numbers need to rise considerably. But the Fine Arts Academy enrollment numbers are already well under the projected 150-200 per grade.

"What's really important for students to know is that we're trying to do our best to make decisions that we feel will help our programs," Reyes said. "But we're certainly not going to say we have this 100% down."

But for now, Pringle and Elder will be stretched thin.

"I can kind of feel a little bit of the burnout coming on," Elder said. "It's early in the year, so we'll see. But it definitely does not feel like a sustainable job. But I'm happy enough to be there, like the kids are great and everyone at Lamar is really nice."

Pringle's new motivation is to restore the two full-time teaching positions to McCallum.

"In 2001, I was the first person to teach at



Orchestra director Ricky Pringle helps a sixth grader in the fifth-period beginner cello and bass class at Lamar Middle School learn notes and finger position. Photo and caption by Ingrid Smith

McCallum and not have to teach McCallum and Lamar," Pringle said. "It's kind of sad that after 21 years, it's going back to this."

The effect

According to Pringle, the creation of the sixth through 12th grade program will undoubtedly benefit orchestra students at Lamar. Frequent interaction between the young string players and McCallum's more experienced musicians will set the middle-schoolers up for success.

However, sacrifices will be made. Cello class and viola class have been combined, and both violin and bass classes will be cut in half. Additionally, Pringle and Elder have had to adjust their teaching styles to fit the needs of students ages 11-18.

"I have mixed feelings about it," Pringle said. "I am excited that I will have a hand in what goes on at the middle school. I'm not completely excited about now adding three more groups to have to take to UIL from Lamar."

While Pringle doesn't feel that taking on Lamar is fair to him as a teacher, other AISD orchestra directors have it far worse. Some orchestra positions were cut to halftime, some were eliminated, and one middle school got rid of its fine arts program altogether.

"I think it might ultimately kind of set a scary precedent that a teacher can do everything, middle school and high school," Elder

will continue to change.

As a person who is seriously considering pursuing music professionally, Wiseman said he is sad that the district's solution to budget issues is so often cutting fine arts programs.

"I think in general, a lot of people, especially people with money, undervalue music," Wiseman said. "I guess that's something I'm going to have to get used to."

According to Pringle, the district doesn't understand that orchestra is a "path forward" for many students.

"For some people, it's a place where they find their friends," Pringle said. "It's a place where the real serious kids get to work on their skills, work on leadership skills and do all of those things. For some, depending on what your background is like, it's a nice way to better your life."

Pringle said that unless he can return to McCallum full-time, the future of the orchestra program, and his role in it, is insecure.

"If something doesn't change in terms of investment into our programs, I see programs disappearing permanently," Pringle said. "If things come back, if things come right, then I could definitely see myself being here in 10 years and maybe a little bit beyond that."

While this year's budget constraints are binding, Pringle and Elder agree that this will not work as a permanent solution.

"I do not think this is a sustainable fix," Elder said. "If they do decide to keep it, it's just going to be a revolving door of teachers going in and out because I don't think anyone will want to stay in this situation."

“If something doesn't change in terms of investment, ... I see programs disappearing permanently.”
—orchestra director Ricky Pringle

said. "I think that's a trend that maybe our campus is excited about. But in reality, it puts a lot more work onto a teacher that's already doing so much work."

The future

Senior bassist Peter Wiseman is upset that the program he's so invested in