

Playing community

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ABSTRACT

Sometimes there's an abundance of both resources and expertise – as in the case of the music school, which has generous donors, enthusiastic families willing to pay, a big old house, and a roster of accomplished teachers.

FULL TEXT

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I like spending time at the neighborhood music school where my kids take lessons. I sit in a chair in the hallway, paying no attention to the work I've brought, listening instead to the overlapping sounds coming through the closed doors of the different studios: a pianist whose feet dangle far short of the pedals banging through a nursery rhyme, a violinist taking apart and reassembling a Bach minuet, a flutist somewhere upstairs repeating a soaring run over and over, a rhythm section down in the basement churning and stopping and churning again. I enjoy the recitals, too, accepting the scraggly disastrous meltdowns along with the flashes of virtuosity. It's all part of how aspiring musicians equip themselves to play not just for themselves but for and with others.

The music school isn't just a pleasant extra for the community. It's one of the institutions that help give shape to life by taking an inchoate urge – in this case, to make beautiful noise – and giving it form, inculcating competence and purpose along the way.

That process happens in all sorts of ways in the schools, of course, but beyond the schools are a variety of institutions, some public but most of them private, more narrowly focused on particular forms: the music school, sports teams, dance studios, martial arts academies, arts centers, places where you can learn to cook or solder or speak a foreign language or play chess or make something out of clay or wood or numbers. Each of them takes some basic urge – to go fast or be strong, to handle color or texture, to do things with your body or your mind – and refines it into knowing how to do something properly, even well.

Put them all together, and you're looking at an important part of a community's apparatus for realizing the ambitions and aspirations of its people, especially its young people.

Each of these institutions consists, at its heart, of expertise backed by resources. Sometimes just a little of each is enough: a single dedicated instructor collecting just enough in students' fees to pay the rent. Sometimes there's an abundance of both resources and expertise – as in the case of the music school, which has generous donors, enthusiastic families willing to pay, a big old house, and a roster of accomplished teachers. Look around town at all the conservatories, art schools, tech schools, colleges, and research universities, and you'll see that Boston's all about bringing together expertise and resources, students and teachers. It's one of the city's defining strengths. It's true that a lot of parents these days overschedule their kids, unnecessarily sheltering them from the lessons learned in pickup games and other childhood improvisations. And it's also true that among the college-going classes there's altogether too much emphasis on assembling a ridiculously long brag list of extracurricular activities to present someday to an admissions office. But don't let those unfortunate tendencies blind you to the real value of a community's many teaching institutions, from the most elaborate to the most modest.

There's a courtly gent, a retiree, who has a music lesson at the same time as one of my daughters. The old man

and the little girl talk companionably about their instruments as they sit side by side in the hallway, waiting their turn. He takes his clarinet out of its case and shows her how it fits together, how it makes sound. She asks a lot of questions. He may yet succeed in luring her away from the piano to a wind instrument – for which, Lord knows, she's certainly got the lung capacity. She's still a beginner; he's finally giving all the time to music that he couldn't afford to give it when he was immersed in his career.

For the few minutes they see each other each week, they're fellow students, musicians, neighbors. That's part of the value of a neighborhood music school and all such institutions. They help to shape a neighborhood not only by giving form to creative impulses but also by helping to turn strangers into neighbors.

Carlo Rotella is director of American studies at Boston College. His column appears regularly in the Globe.

Illustration

Caption: istockphoto/ globe staff illustration

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