More schools getting in tune with mariachi

By LINDA STEWART BALL – Jan 5, 2009
ASSOCIATED PRESS

DALLAS (AP) — Jose Perez often butted heads with his grandfather, who emigrated from Mexico years ago and feared his American-born grandson didn't appreciate the sacrifices his family made. Then the teenager started playing the music of the elder's homeland.

Perez, 14, took a mariachi music class at his Fort Worth high school, and gained a cultural connection to his grandfather as he learned how to strum the five-stringed vihuela (pronounced vee-way-la).

"He used to always yell at me because I didn't want to do my chores," Jose said. "But as soon as I got into mariachi, I guess we developed a better relationship."

Mariachi not only gave Perez closer ties with his family, it gave the North Side High School freshman one more reason to stay in school.

With soaring dropout rates among Hispanic students, mariachi education programs, long popular in parts of South Texas and California, are springing up in schools across the country to help keep the nation's largest and fastest-growing ethnic group academically engaged.

"You don't have to worry about your kids joining gangs, we provide the gang," said William Gradante, a master mariachi teacher and chairman of the National Association for Music Education's Mariachi Advisory Committee.

Daniel Sheehy, director and curator of Smithsonian Folkways Recordings in Washington, D.C., said hundreds of public schools have mariachi education programs. They're striking a hopeful chord in some unlikely places, from Washington state and Idaho to Illinois, Virginia and the Carolinas, often wherever there's an influx of Mexican immigrants.

Aside from encouraging Hispanic students, mariachi is bringing parents into schools who might have been too intimidated to visit before. School concerts are often packed with parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles who know all the old songs and are often heard singing along.

When their children come home donning traditional mariachi garb and asking their advice on proper pronunciation of Spanish songs, the music becomes "a kind of cultural glue or family glue in some cases," Sheehy said.

"Families come from Mexico and don't speak English and two generations later their kids don't speak Spanish," he said. "Mariachi is kind of a bridge."

Mariachi is an alternative to traditional band, orchestra or choir for students who already love the music or seek exposure to something new. Ensembles typically include a couple of trumpets, a guitar, violins and ethnic instruments: two vihuelas (resembling little guitars) and a guitarron, the big-bellied bass.

"It's really a very high art form that requires virtuosity playing," said Alan Lambert, mariachi director for the Grand Prairie School District, near Dallas.

Lambert, who launched the mariachi program in his district two years ago, said most people in America have not been exposed to the music's serious side. He shadowed a mariachi group in Guadalajara last summer where musicians played some of the best violins in the world: a Stradivarius and a Guarnerius.

The Southwest hosts many mariachi festivals and "the level of musicianship is incredibly high," said Donna Emmanuel, a music education professor at the University of North Texas who teaches the history of mariachi to teens at a mariachi summer camp.

In Texas, where 500,000 students participate in music classes, mariachi ensembles are competing for the first time this year for bragging rights through the University Interscholastic League.

Although some see the sanctioned statewide competition as further proof of mariachi's acceptance, others say it comes at a cost.

Traditionally, mariachi stems from an aural tradition, passed down from musician to musician because little was written and improvisation played a role. Some purists worry that the budding standardization in the classroom will kill the celebratory, spontaneous nature of the music, in the way that jazz has become more academic.

Others point to the more pressing challenges these programs face as they spread.

Beyond the expense of instruments and uniforms, there is a shortage of degreed music instructors with a strong understanding or appreciation of mariachi music, experts say. There's also a dearth of sheet music and mariachi method books, though some scholars are scrambling to fill that void.

"It's very popular," said Marcia M. Neel, a music educator who helped start Clark County School District's mariachi program in Las Vegas in 2001. It has grown to include more than 2,000 students.

Greg Chavez, a sophomore at Sam Houston High School in Arlington, Texas, began playing the guitarron last year. His parents played mariachi music, but he said he never paid attention until he got older.

"I really love the music," said Chavez, a 15-year-old first-generation Mexican-American. "I just wanted to try something different and traditional to Mexico.

"Some kids, they're like 'What? Mariachi? Why do you play that?'" he said. "Well, it's fun to play."