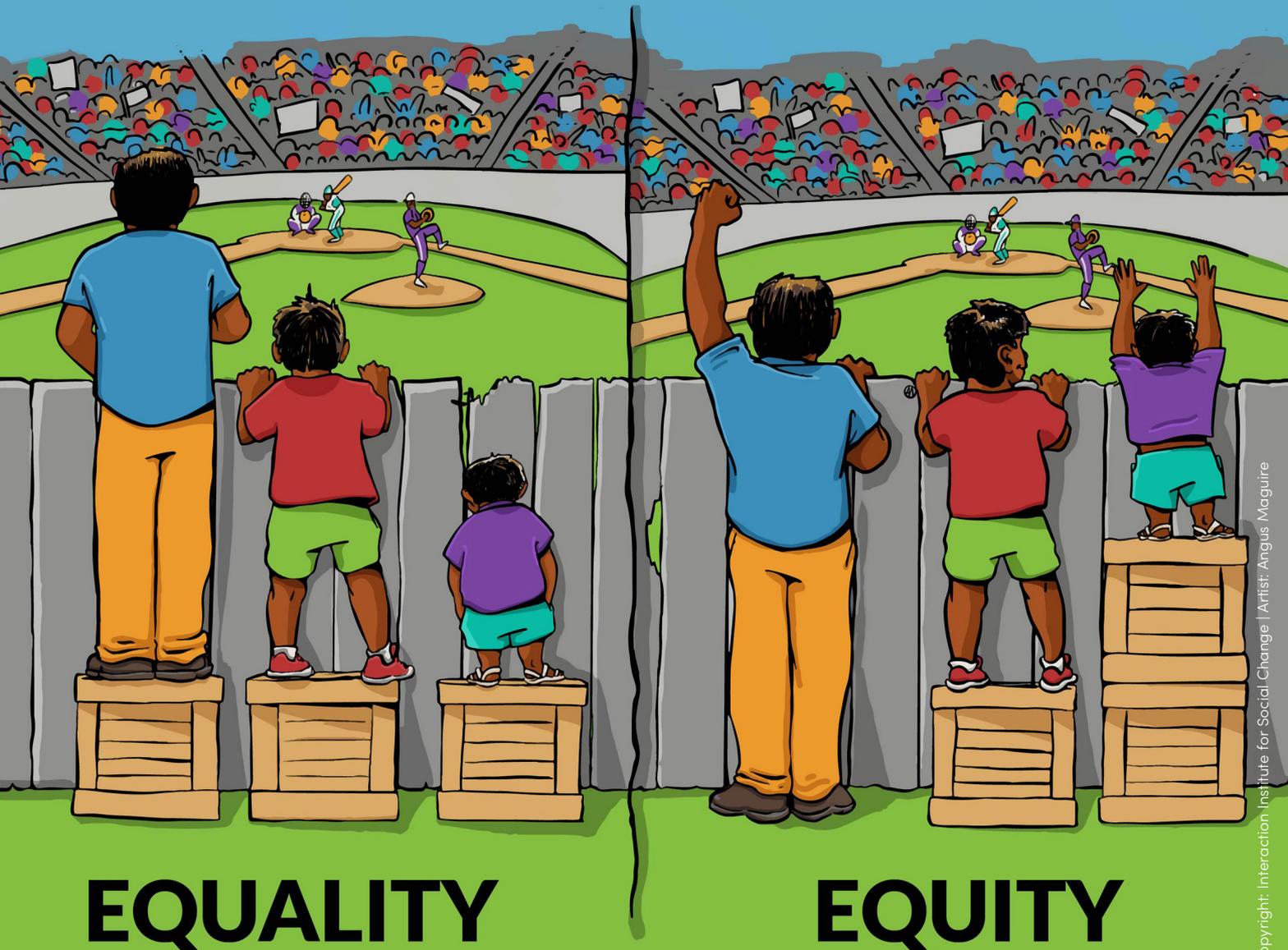


Equitable Access to Private Lessons

Making Music Affordable for Those in Need

By Natalie Burton



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In an ideal world, everyone has access to private music lessons regardless of one's financial standing. However, the sad reality is that people are not given equal opportunity for music education. Private music teachers trying to maintain their own finances encounter students with financial difficulties. Have you ever had a student unable to continue lessons due to cost? How did you respond to their needs?

I can think of two young boys who came to me for beginning lessons. They were bright and loved playing piano. I was excited with their progress, but after a few months realized their parents were struggling financially. They were unable to afford a piano or weighted keyboard and were soon unable to take lessons altogether. Not knowing what resources might be available to assist, my response to the situation was one of helplessness.

I lost the experience to teach such wonderful students, and they lost the opportunity to take private piano lessons. If I had known about the resources available for students in need, or how I could help create those resources, it would have been a different story. Since then, I have discovered resources to better equip myself and others when faced with these situations. With determination and creativity, no student has to miss out on private music lessons simply due to financial hardship.

A great first resource is local music schools that give private lesson opportunities to low-income families. Some music schools will offer need-based scholarships for lessons and free or loaned instruments to students who meet income requirements. Teachers might be surprised at how much is offered in their area by doing a simple online search: "music education low income (city)." It is important for teachers to be familiar with what is offered at the music schools in their area, so they can help connect families with what they need. Teachers can even offer their services to help with events, administration, teaching lessons, publicity and financial donations.

For teachers who want to provide discounted lessons through their own private studio, MusicLink is an excellent resource. MusicLink helps students, ages 18 or younger from low-income families, with lesson-associated

costs. They can offer help to a student already part of a teacher's studio or can pair a student in need of discounted lessons with a teacher in their area. Through an online application, MusicLink will take care of the documentation to verify a student's financial eligibility, saving the teacher from having to ask the family for financial forms.

Once a student is deemed eligible, the teacher then volunteers to teach the student at half the cost of regular lessons or less. MusicLink offers the student free or discounted music materials from major publishers, eligibility for summer music camp scholarships, and instrument loans or donations, including help moving pianos into homes (MusicLink 2021). Teachers can find the contact information for their region's MusicLink coordinator on the organization's website to get started.

Instruments in a student's community can also be a great resource. Teachers can reach out to the music directors at their student's school or church to let them know of the student's need. They might allow the student to use their facilities when they are not being used at certain times of the day, they might connect them with someone who is willing to donate an instrument or sell one at a lower cost.

Teachers who cannot afford to teach at a discounted rate, but still want to provide music lessons to low-income students, can consider ways to fund private studio scholarships. Eligibility can be based on an area's low-income tax bracket or on whatever the teacher considers qualifying. Teachers can ask for students' financial verification with documents such as the first page of a family's tax form, eligibility for free or reduced lunch through the school system, food stamps or Section 8 housing.

There are numerous ways to fund studio scholarships. Individual donors can be sought through friends and community or online through crowdfunding websites like GoFundMe. Fundraising activities can also be turned into fun studio events, such as car washes, bake sales, studio garage sales and practice-thons, where students raise money based on their practice hours. Some local businesses also offer fundraising support. For example, the smoothie shop Jamba will sell

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buy one get one coupon cards at half the price, that can then be sold for profit at the full price (Jamba 2021).

Benefit concerts are another great way to raise money for studio scholarships. Local music teachers can collaborate to give a recital, or students of individual studios can give a recital at a retirement home or other venue with the opportunity for attendees to contribute to scholarship funds. Scholarship funding can also be built into a teacher's set studio fees. For example, a percentage of the lesson fees, yearly studio fee and/or late fees can go toward scholarships. Teachers can even establish a studio donation fund that other parents in the studio can willingly donate to when they pay for their own child's lessons.

In addition to the above resources, teachers can come up with creative alternatives to make lessons more affordable for students in need. Lesson costs can be significantly reduced through group or partner lessons, shorter lesson times or bi-weekly lessons for the motivated student. If a teacher is willing, they can even offer longer lesson times for the rate of a shorter lesson. Teachers can also consider using a bartering system in place of lesson fees. Lessons can be exchanged for things the teacher needs, such as meals, housework, yardwork, home improvement projects, babysitting and so forth.

Lynnette Barney, a piano teacher in Tucson, Arizona, has used the bartering system with success. She shares: "I've had an 11-year-old boy 'pay' part of his tuition by helping me with yardwork, and teenage girls help with my music database project and filing. I've had parents help me laminate materials, help with the database, do yardwork, and one dad installed a tile floor for us. We've traded for meals and tutoring with math, languages and the arts. It's been a very positive experience."

People tend to place a higher value on items they have invested in, whether through money, time or energy. Therefore, it is important for the family to make some kind of investment for lessons, even if it means paying only a small amount. If no investment is made, it is easy for the family to take the lessons for granted and treat missing lessons or not preparing for lessons well as less consequential. When creating different ways for families to

pay for lessons, it is helpful to put in writing the agreed upon payment method to avoid any misunderstandings.

The benefits of learning music are innumerable. Making music gives the freedom to imagine and create. It also helps develop important life skills, making it a significant part of education that should be available for all. In Susan Hallam's book *The Power of Music*, she lists several areas improved by learning music, such as aural perception and language skills, development of literacy skills, aural and visual memory, spatial reasoning and mathematical performance, intellectual development, creativity, executive functioning and self-regulation, and psychological well-being (2015, 9–16).

These skills all contribute to a child's academic success. This is important for all children, but especially important for low-income children, whose academic success could lead to greater financial stability in their future. People are not given equal opportunities for success in the world. However, private music teachers can create equity in their own studios by offering people from all economic standings the opportunity to take music lessons.

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