

“Don’t Waste Your Money on Piano Lessons”:

The 5 Essentials of Effective Piano Lessons

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A good friend of mine always says, “The most expensive groceries you buy are the ones that you throw away.”

That bag of kale that ends up rotting in the crisper may have been a good idea, but without a recipe and a genuine enthusiasm for it, it is actually just a waste of money.

Now, I think that every moment a student spends sitting at the piano or learning the fundamentals of music is valuable, but in the big picture of music education - we’ve got a rotting kale problem.

Parents say to me, “I want my child to learn how to play the piano.”

I ask, “Why?”

Parents reply, “I want a well-rounded education for my child and I think he will enjoy it.”

I think, “Great start, but let’s dig a little deeper.”

I don’t know about you but I took four years of French in high school for the same reason and, well, I don’t speak French. The information was delivered, I even did pretty well, but that did not translate into competence, much less fluency.

Why?

There are probably lots of reasons, but the one I am sure of is this.

I had not decided to become fluent in French.

To my parents and teachers, everything seemed to be going fine. I listened, I repeated, I memorized, I studied for tests. There was ‘progress’ which is what we parents look for. But all that while, I was on a track to “nulle part” (that means ‘nowhere’ in French, I had to look it up).

And now, I really regret it.

Even if I was never going to be an ambassador to France or even pass the AP French exam, had I been working towards the goal of fluency on a conscious level, things would have been different. **A different vision and goal** would have inspired choices that would lead me there. Especially if my French program had incorporated varied and immersive opportunities such as French movie nights, conversation groups, French magazines and newspapers, letter writing to native speakers, French debate club etc.

So, what do my squandered French high school years have to do with piano lessons?

Most parents do not sign their children up to become virtuosos and that is fine. They just want to open a door for them but they then unwittingly settle for ‘getting it on the schedule’ and relying

on vaguely defined ‘progress’ to feel comfortable that their child is benefiting and that their money is well spent.

Eventually, their child stops lessons for one reason or another and may or may not have the literacy and proficiency to have them be confident and competent “musicians” as they move into adulthood.

So how do we consistently provide this literacy and proficiency? How can we make sure we are not just giving lessons but training lifelong musicians?

We must support and maintain students’ discipline and enthusiasm over the long term and that requires 5 Essentials:

1. **Measurable achievement** – Music has so many layers and trajectories that students and parents need a clear map of accomplishments to guide their journey and keep them motivated. When your goal is tangible, you have a better chance of making it specific and measurable and thus attainable.
2. **Peer interaction and accountability** – Learning is social and peer interactions help extend understanding. Children need lots of opportunities to apply their growing knowledge in order to retain what they have learned. Working as a group brings a team spirit to the often solo activity of piano. The joys of playing ensemble are immeasurable and a little friendly competition goes a long way.
3. **Peak performance moments** – An ideal performance opportunity motivates and inspires like nothing else. Whether it is the technical accomplishment of a solo performance, the connection and satisfaction of contributing your part to an ensemble arrangement, improvising on a theme or sharing an original composition, every student will find their access to the joy of shared music.
4. **Varied activities** – Approaching concepts and skills from different angles can be like cross training. Not just reading music but writing, listening, studying eras and playing games, build complementary muscles while keeping things fun and interesting.
5. **The goal of fluency** – Students should consider how music will change their life. Would they like to play in a band, compose for movies, jam with friends, become a recording engineer, conduct an orchestra, be a singer/songwriter, teach music to kids, or just play for fun? Remind them that all of this is available to them once they make the decision to learn this new language and every milestone is an essential step toward this vision.

How we implement the 5 Essentials at Piano Lab

I am a huge advocate for ensemble learning because it is like a language class, conversation group, and cultural study all in one. The kids support and encourage one another and our classes are group by age, level and learning style for maximum comfort, progress and fun.

We play speed games for note identification progressive sight reading, we take turns transcribing at the whiteboard, we compose songs featuring different elements of theory, we listen and analyze music and discuss a wide range of musical topics such as instrumentation and performing on

stage. These broad discussions remind students why they are here, inspire the commitment to fluency and help them envision their own musical goals.

Students often find their ‘peak performing moment’ in a regular class when everyone has polished their individual part and an ensemble piece comes together. For others it is a solo performance at a recital or even sharing a composition they have written. We also encourage ‘jamming’ together and seeing where creativity takes you.

In order to provide clear, measurable progress, we have developed a tool called, “Scaling Up’. This is an fold-out cardboard piano with a full 88 keys each waiting to be filled with student achievements. Whether it is learning the name of all of the keys or being able to play their major scales hands together, this chart will give students and parent a visual representation of their musical growth.

But no matter what environment you choose for your child’s music education, ensure that the program has the elements of success. Be clear on how your child will avoid the common pitfalls that result in an adult who ‘used to take piano lessons but doesn’t remember much.’”

Rather than rotting in the fridge, we want to see that bag of kale turn into a delicious meal, a body that feels good, and even access to a new, healthier lifestyle.

Don’t waste your money on piano lessons. Invest in your child becoming a lifelong musician.