

New group aims to improve arts education for Hispanics

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A group of community, arts and education leaders announced Tuesday the launch of the Hispanic Alliance for the Performing Arts, a nonprofit organization aimed at boosting participation in the performing arts in Austin's growing Hispanic community.

As its first initiative, the alliance has begun a local version of the celebrated intensive music education program for youth known as El Sistema, which emphasizes training in orchestral music for children.

Prominent arts philanthropist Teresa Lozano Long, the alliance's board president, said the group came together after leaders noted that Hispanic participation in the arts has not kept pace with the population growth.

The 2010 census showed that Austin's Hispanic population increased 38.5 percent since 2000. Latinos now account for 35 percent of the city's population.

But Hispanic participation in the arts is lagging. A 2008 study by the National Endowment for the Arts found that only 36 percent of the adult Hispanic population attends arts events, compared with 55 percent of the Anglo adult population. For classical music, the numbers are even smaller, the study found: Only 3.8 percent of the adult Hispanic population attended a classical music event, compared with 11.3 percent of the Anglo adult population.

Audiences for classical music have shrunk across all demographics in the past few decades, the 2008 arts endowment study showed, dropping 29 percent between 1982 and 2008. It's a statistic that has had many classical music groups concerned about future audiences.

Long also pointed to the correlation between music education and academic achievement, saying the Hispanic Alliance also hoped to stem the region's dropout rate by offering Latino students free music lessons.

A report from the Austin school district showed that for the 2009-10 school year, 69 percent of high school and middle school students who dropped out were Hispanic.

A 2006 study conducted by the National Association for Music Education found that schools with music programs have significantly higher graduation rates (90.2 percent) than those without (72.9 percent).

The Hispanic Alliance's first El Sistema-inspired program, called Austin Soundwaves, started this week at East Austin College Prep Academy, a charter middle school. More than 40 students have enrolled to study violin, viola, cello or percussion. A second group will be added in early 2012. Students are allowed to borrow instruments for free.

The alliance's board has raised more than \$100,000 and is seeking to add \$250,000 to its coffers. Instructors for the Austin Soundwaves program are coordinated through the University of Texas' College of Fine Arts.

Texas has two other El Sistema programs, in San Antonio and Fort Worth.

Created nearly three decades ago in Venezuela as a way to bring classical music training to underprivileged children, El Sistema is now an internationally recognized and codified system. El Sistema's best-known graduate is renowned conductor Gustavo Dudamel, music director of the Los Angeles Philharmonic.

The El Sistema program is demanding. Music classes are scheduled as a part of the school's regular curriculum, not as an after-school program. Classes are held four days a week, along with a Saturday rehearsal. Each

student also receives a weekly private lesson.

Alliance leaders said that its programs will not be limited only to Hispanics. As the program grows, the alliance will expand to other area schools.

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