

Seattle Youth Symphony Orchestras | SYSO in the Schools

Seattle Youth Symphony Orchestras (SYSO) is the largest youth orchestra training program in the United States. Its mission is to provide life changing musical experiences for talented students in the Pacific Northwest, regardless of each student's financial resources. SYSO began its 73rd season in 2015. SYSO offers four Academic Year Orchestras, two summer programs, and two programs that partner with public schools to complement the in-school music program.

The Need: In 2009, SYSO was selected to receive an Excellence Award from The Wallace Foundation to expand "SYSO in the Schools," a program that provides school-based musical instruction. The Wallace Foundation Excellence Awards help exemplary arts organizations pioneer effective practices to engage more people in arts activities. As part of the award, SYSO was required to implement an evaluation of the recruitment, retention and advancement of students in its funded program. At this point, in 2009, SYSO had some experience surveying stakeholders to determine program satisfaction, but did not have a habit of using evaluation to track program impact. SYSO contracted with **MEM**consultants to develop and implement an evaluation plan that would meet the expectations of their funder.

MEMconsultants worked with SYSO and The Wallace Foundation to clarify expectations and design an evaluation plan that would meet the needs of both parties. The consultants also worked with Seattle Public Schools to agree upon a Memorandum of Understanding for data collection activities. The following data collection activities were included in the plan:

- Student Surveys and Interviews
- Parent Survey, administered during down time before a student performance
- Music instructor Interviews

Additionally, **MEM**consultants reviewed program records provided by SYSO and Seattle Public Schools to determine enrollment, attendance and retention rates and describe the demographics of students served. At the end of each of the three award years, **MEM**consultants formally reported progress towards achieving program goals and identified opportunities to improve both the program and the evaluation.

When the three year project was complete, SYSO continued its commitment to evaluation by maintaining many of the evaluation activities the grant had funded and by expanding data collection activities to other programs. Now, when SYSO seeks new funding to expand and build their programs, the organization builds evaluation into the budget, enabling the organization to engage in a cycle of continuous quality improvement that begins with program inception and continues throughout implementation.

SYSO has developed a culture of learning within the organization, regularly using evaluation findings to sustain and improve programs, sharing results with program staff and engaging staff in data collection activities when appropriate. **MEM**consultants has continued to work with SYSO to identify areas of impact and opportunities for improvement.

*I was skeptical of the value of evaluation for an arts organization. However, we knew that SYSO made a difference in young people's lives but we weren't sure of how to measure that impact in qualitative and quantitative ways. Through our work with **MEM**consultants, we've made great use of evaluation to not only produce evidence of our impact, but also to develop and improve our programs. We now use data regularly to understand who we are serving and how we can continue to deliver excellent programs to youth. **MEM**consultants changed my viewpoint regarding data and evaluation from skeptic to true believer.*

*~Dan Petersen,
Executive Director*

