

School band programs get \$925,000 boost for new instruments

By KC Cowan
The Southwest Portland Post

The Portland Public Schools board of directors recently voted to invest nearly a million dollars in new musical instruments for school bands, and Southwest school music programs will benefit.

The special Portland Arts Tax pays for music teachers, but the money can't be used to buy new instruments, so the school board agreed to the one-time investment. It's long overdue. Some of the tubas, clarinets and trumpets have been in rotation since the 1940s.

During the recession, many middle



Sixth grader Conor Walsh started learning trombone at Jackson Middle School this year. (Post photo by KC Cowan)

and grade schools had to abandon their band programs, and they've been clawing their way back ever since.

Jackson Middle School is an example. It reinstated its band program just last year with a single class for beginning band music.

This year, Kristin Cywinski took over the program; she teaches three classes. She loves her job and her students. But it's been a struggle, with an inadequate number of instruments in the district for students to rent.

"Just about a month ago, we finally got our first bass clarinet," Cywinski said. "But I have three people who are going to play it, and so we have three mouthpieces and (the bass clarinet) has to stay here and the students take their own clarinets home to practice the fingering."

Cywinski pointed out that the bass clarinet is a vastly different instrument than a regular one and students can't practice the "wind" aspect of that particular wind instrument because it never leaves the school.

Of her 67 students, 17 rent instruments from the district that they can take home for approximately \$30 a year.

Others either own their instruments or rent one from a music store for around \$30 a month. That price makes it impossible for some children to participate in band at all.

"My goal is that anyone who would have the desire to play an instrument, regardless of their socio-economic status, would be able to play in a band," said Cywinski.

"And that's one reason why these

instruments coming from the district are so important," she added. Cywinski said she is "thrilled and excited" at the prospect of increasing her inventory.

She said she particularly longs for a bass tuba that is small enough for middle school students. The one she has is better suited to a high-schooler.

"We can play anything, but what we are missing, because we have no tuba, is the bottom. And every good musician knows that the most important part of any ensemble is the bass line; it's the foundation."

The \$925,000 budgeted by the District will purchase nearly 750 instruments.

Jennie Johnson, who repairs instruments for PPS, said she will mostly use it for flutes, clarinets and trombones, although after conducting a thorough inventory, she will fill specific needs for some band programs. Not every request can be honored.

"Three million (dollars) would be needed to make every school equal, but this is huge, more than we've ever received in one lump sum," Johnson said.

Every day six to seven instruments come into her shop for repair. She does her best with the aging inventory. As much as she'd like to retire some of the existing 3,500 instruments now being used, the school district can't afford to.

"We've kind of been ignored for 25 years, with nothing purchased for about that long, so as instruments get more wear and tear there's only so much repair you can do, and either have to completely rebuild or toss them."

The bids go out soon and the coming



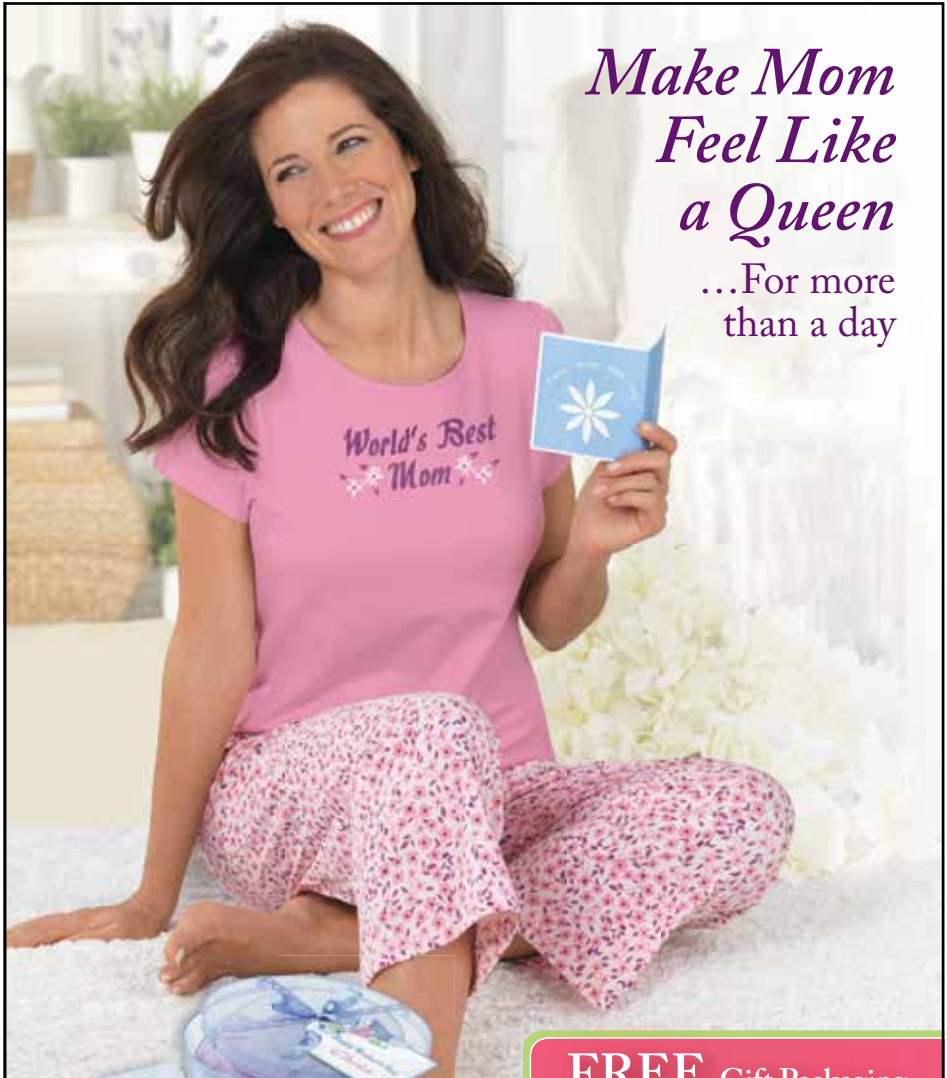
Kristin Cywinski, band director at Jackson Middle School, holds a tuba, one of the instruments she hopes to replace soon. (Post photo by KC Cowan)

school year will open with shiny new band equipment shipped to band programs across the district.

The benefits go beyond making music. A music program can sometimes be the thing that keeps a student excited about school.

That describes first year band student Conor Walsh. He chose the trombone because "it's the loudest and most obnoxious" instrument.

After trying many different clubs and activities at Jackson Middle School, it was band that captured Walsh's enthusiasm. "It's my favorite class of the day," he said.



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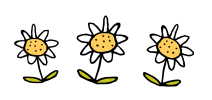
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