



Pilot Rock band teacher Jacob Try directs the band as they play "The Battle Cry of Freedom" during rehearsal Wednesday at Pilot Rock High School.

Staff photo by E.J. Harris

A new Try for music



Pilot Rock freshman Abby Grimes plays "Jingle Bells" on the flute during band rehearsal Wednesday at Pilot Rock High School.

Staff photo by E.J. Harris



Pilot Rock music teacher Jacob Try instructs his middle school chorus class Wednesday in Pilot Rock.

Staff photo by E.J. Harris

Pilot Rock schools resurrect music programs under leadership of new teacher

By PHIL WRIGHT
East Oregonian

Jacob Try begins most mornings with a bang, blare and beat.

The music teacher for Pilot Rock schools said there's nothing quite like the cacophony of teaching band to get things moving.

"It's the best," he said. "This is the best job in the world. To start a program from scratch, and to have administration have my back — it's the best."

The Pilot Rock School District cut its music program 13 years ago. But in 2014, finances were strong enough to bring it back. Try, 23, hails from Philadelphia and graduated with a degree in music education from Indiana University of Pennsylvania. He said he spotted an ad for the Pilot Rock spot and applied.

The big appeal, he said, was the opportunity to resurrect the program the way he saw fit.

Annie Tester, principal at the small town's junior-senior high, said she knew Try was the right man for the job during his interview via the internet. She was the district's last music teacher and said she saw Try, fresh from college, was all about the challenge of building the program.

The high school band now has 31 members and the chorus has 28, while 29 students play in the elementary school band and 35 sing in its chorus. The rewards from the efforts were on display last Thursday when the groups performed to honor veterans.

"In a year's time, to see what happened — I'm amazed," Tester said. "They played the 'Star Spangled Banner' in just a year."

Eighth-grader Riley Waggoner



Pilot Rock freshman Dakota Fortner uses an open fingering while playing the trumpet on "Jingle Bells" during rehearsal Wednesday at Pilot Rock High School.

Staff photo by E.J. Harris

sings baritone for the chorus. He said he started last year after his best friend described how fun it was.

"I tried it out and stuck with it ever since," he said.

Participating in the chorus is like being in one big family, Riley said, and he has built friendships with the other baritones.

"You really get to bond with other people," he said. "You just

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get to know everybody and have fun times together."

District superintendent Steve Staniak said he recognizes the value of music education. While the district lost about 35 students this year — a drop of about 10 percent — the school board, administration and the community consider the music program a high priority and feel lucky to have Try.

"I think there's a lot of support in Pilot Rock for music," he said.

That support has showed up in recent years in grants and donations. Tester tried to get a pep band going a couple of years ago and received \$15,000 from the Tim Fetzer Memorial Foundation for new musical instruments. The Wildhorse Foundation in 2015 gave the music program a \$14,450 grant, which Try used to buy more instruments. And a benefactor from Pennsylvania provided a donation for almost all of the elementary school clarinets.

Try also said he focused much of his teaching that first year on "really building a lot of 'you can do this' attitude" in the students.

Rather than knock them for mistakes, he said, he emphasizes what they do well. After all, he said, the student can hear their errors.

Ninth-grader Abby Grimes plays flute. The program and

performances are fun, she said, but she also found music benefits her other classwork.

"It helps me focus," she said.

Kody Johnson, 14, plays trumpet in the high school and pep bands. He said students last year were abuzz about the program coming back, and that caught his interest. He said did not play an instrument before joining, but under Try's instruction is now looking at a career in music.

"He's teaching me to conduct," Kody said. "He's just been wonderful."

Try said he sees his role as more than teaching students how to read music, hit a note or sing a melody.

"I'm teaching you how to be a good person," he said. "I'm teaching you to be well-rounded. I'm teaching you to be competent. ... And the goal is having you leave this building a better person."

And the more students who pack his classes, the better, he said. Even if they are not inclined to music, Try encouraged them to give it a shot.

The bands and choirs next event is the Christmas program. Try said they are aiming to pull off a madrigal — a song with several vocal parts — and "Jingle Bells" rumba style.

Contact Phil Wright at pwright@eastoregonian.com or 541-966-0833.

