

Learning: How to expand regionally as a nonprofit

Insights from Lead Guitar

Arts Foundation for Tucson
and Southern Arizona
Resource Case Study



ARTS
FOUNDATION
FOR TUCSON AND
SOUTHERN ARIZONA

LEAD GUITAR

What is Lead Guitar?

Lead Guitar (LG) is a nonprofit organization that establishes permanent classical guitar classes in low-income public schools with lack of access to the arts. Since 1999, it has offered instrumental music education to over 18,000 students. Their goal is to appeal to underserved students who are often not drawn to the traditional band and orchestra programs by using the guitar, which is an instrument that appeals to young people. By integrating the curriculum integrity of the more traditional programs with the guitar, Lead Guitar seeks to provide high-quality instrumental music education to students who otherwise would not receive it.

How it Works:

Training the schoolteachers at the participating schools is a crucial element for the success of the program. The program partners a Lead Guitar instructor with a certified teacher from a school or the teacher-of-record (TOR) to co-teach a year-round guitar class. The TOR learns and plays along with the students while the LG instructor models the curriculum. After class, the LG teacher provides private or small group lessons to the students. When the class meets without the LG instructor present, the TOR guides practice and reviews concepts introduced in previous meetings.

Participation in the program:

Lead Guitar is currently serving more than 69 schools in five states. In Arizona, it operated in 21 low-income public schools and taught over 800 students to play the guitar and 22 public school teachers to teach LG's guitar curriculum in 2018-19. In addition to Arizona, Lead Guitar also serves cities such as Los Angeles, California, Chicago, Illinois, and Enid, Oklahoma.

History of Expansion:

Although Lead Guitar was established as a nonprofit in 2007, the core curriculum was developed in 1999 by its founder, Brad Richter, when he was in Page, Arizona as a touring artist. There, he started a guitar workshop at Page High School, where he met talented and highly at-risk students and witnessed the students' drive to teach themselves classical guitar. As the program's success in Page became known and Brad continued to have conversations about music education in each city he visited, the program began to expand to other cities in Arizona. By 2005, the program was established in Bullhead City, Tucson, and Sedona.

In 2006, Marc Sandroff, LG's co-founder established a 501(c)3 for Lead Guitar and the program expanded further. By 2010, most of the program was in Tucson and in 2014, they expanded into Phoenix. In 2016, the program entered Chicago and then Los Angeles in 2019. In the fall of 2020, Lead Guitar plans to enter Denver. With each expansion, LG has learned what kinds of networks and resources are necessary to have an impact in large cities and continues to apply these lessons to new cities.

Engagement Challenge:

As the program expands regionally, Lead Guitar faces two main challenges, including quality control, in terms of program delivery, and creating an operating structure that effectively manages the increased capacity.

Creating an Operating Structure:

In an effort to meet the demands of the expansion, LG changed their organizational structure to include a Regional Director position. Regional Directors are tasked with teaching at a maximum of five schools and overseeing instructors in their region through quarterly in-person or video observation. They are also responsible for meeting with principals and staff from prospective partner schools and organize annual events such as Teacher's Workshop.

In addition, they have considered the following key issues as they expand:

- Discerning which operations are best handled locally vs. at the home office
- Looking at multi-year funding opportunities
- Ensuring board, finances and employment practices grow in step with or ahead of expansion.

Ensuring quality of program:

In addition to organizational structure, LG utilizes several metrics and training tools to ensure the quality of the staff and the lessons in the cities they enter into. New instructors go through 10 hours of training and assistant teaching, then have two years of formal mentorship. The mentorships include videoed and live observations and lesson plan reviews. In addition, Regional Directors visit all school sites regularly and check progress against LG age specific milestones. The Regional Directors then review findings with the Executive and Operations Directors and trouble shoot schools that are struggling.

LG also holds Professional Development workshops where they train schoolteachers to teach and play guitar, as well as prepare them to co-teach a guitar class with master instructors. The workshops reinforce key vocabulary and technical concepts and highlight the successes and failures of the program to ensure improvement.

Communication:

As the organization expands, LG values communication between LG instructors and TORs, who see each other weekly. The line of communication between management team members are done usually in the order of email first, then phone, and video chat.

Partnerships with Universities:

To help add legitimacy to the Lead Guitar brand in cities where they are not yet known, the program has established university partnerships with several universities in the regions where they have a presence, including the University of Arizona, Aspen Music Festival & School, and University of Chicago's Logan Center for the Arts. These partnerships also fulfill one of LG's four pillars of service, which is connecting students to their local university. In addition, the universities help provide space and access to global artists, as well as resources to present student showcase concerts, masterclasses, bus-in matinees, and workshops.

Benefits of Expansion:

According to LG, there is unfortunately a limitless demand for their arts education model in low socioeconomic areas of the cities such as in Los Angeles, Chicago and Phoenix. By setting up operations in large urban areas, they have streamlined efforts and used the program's collective power to positively impact many more students. They have also helped direct resources back into in-school arts education. The expansion also helps them develop a career track for talented young instructors to take on leadership roles, such as the Regional Directors, in their organization.

Success Story:

According to LG, the biggest success stories of their program are in the individual transformation of students who participate. Students who were not engaged in school activities and not expected to graduate from high school before entering the LG program have gone on to perform as a soloist at concerts and attend college after graduation. In 2018, Lead Guitar was also recognized by the Chicago Public Schools and the Mayor's Office for their positive impact in the city. They were the only organization to be recognized at the annual Creative School Fund event.

Future Plans:

LG continues its expansion in 2020 with a move into Denver in the fall. In addition, LG is in discussions with a manufacturing partner about switching to guitars made from recycled 'ocean' plastic as well as creating a commercial curriculum to support providing more free programs.

Advice for other nonprofit organizations:

To other nonprofits that are expanding regionally, LG's advice is to go where you have connections and can establish meetings and momentum. Their suggestion is to always follow the momentum.