

HARMONY SOUTH DAKOTA



Changing lives one note at a time.

It's nearing 3 p.m. and students flood over from Hawthorne Elementary into the St. Joseph Cathedral School building. Lining up promptly to receive their yogurt and vanilla wafers, the room fills with giggles as they share their stories from the day and eat their afternoon snacks.

They gather at tables, sitting next to their closest friends. Suddenly, *clap, clap, clap*, Miss Heidi is announcing it's time to rehearse.

This is the start of an afternoon at Harmony South Dakota, a free after-school music program that provides opportunities for children ages 6 and up to participate in choir, percussion ensembles, string orchestra, musicianship classes, as well as private instrumental

lessons. This is more than just an after school program or student choir. It is a group of more than 60 children coming together, regardless of their social and economic conditions, to improve their sense of community and opportunity through the strings on an instrument and the melody of a song.

Building a community.

Harmony started in 2014 in part with a Sioux Empire United Way Community Impact Grant. Their location at St. Joseph's School was ideal for Hawthorne Elementary students, a Title 1 school. Since launching, the program has grown and students from 12 different schools now make their way to Harmony every day school is in session.

Harmony's participants have four core values:

- Everyone Has Value – Harmony South Dakota teaches that everyone has value and deserves to be respected.
- Community Contribution – Each musician has an individual role but they must all work together to create harmony. Everyone makes a vital contribution to the group.
- Perseverance – The children practice every afternoon while school is in session and for five weeks during the summer.
- Do All Things in Love – Everyone deals with difficult and challenging life situations. Harmony South Dakota provides a safe and loving community for children to grow up together.

"While we always strive for excellence, our focus is not on performance, but rather on building relationships," said Dan Goeller, who founded and directs Harmony along with Heidi Goeller. "As trained musicians, it is easy to get caught up in the performance side of things, but we have come to realize that music just happens to be the tool we use to create a safe and encouraging community. As our kids grow up in this nurturing musical community, they experience personal growth, more joy, and a greater passion for life."

The ripple effect.

Ask a student what Harmony means, and you'll often hear the response, "home." Of course, spending nearly 3 hours each afternoon after school with the same group leads to lifelong friendships and relationships that start to feel family-like. Along with the strong commitments made and relationships built, students are also bettering their academics.

Poornima D'Souza, a School Home Liaison with the Sioux Falls School District, has noticed a difference, "Children are more focused now in school. They are able to learn their subjects well, especially math because they can calculate and know the sequence."

A successful 2019 Sioux Empire United Way Campaign will allow Harmony South Dakota to grow their program, creating 20 additional spots and enrolling 80 students total in the program. That means building up future citizens and change-makers of the Sioux Empire, or as long-time Harmony participant Darlene states, "When you're in a community, everyone works together and you're never left out."