

APAP | MetLife Foundation Case Study  
Increasing Arts Access in Underserved Communities

**KALAMAZOO SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA**  
**RURAL COMMUNITY PARTNERS**

Kalamazoo, MI

**Contact**

Jane Ross

[jrooksross@kalamazoosymphony.com](mailto:jrooksross@kalamazoosymphony.com)

269-349-7759 ext 207

[www.KalamazooSymphony.com](http://www.KalamazooSymphony.com)

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**Take Note**

- The KSO is the only orchestra serving a six county area in Southwest Michigan.
- As result of this program, KSO community partners have reported increased community interest in music and strengthening of school music programs. Two rural communities started string programs because of involvement with KSO.
- In challenging economic times, the KSO has expanded the program by working closely with community partners to secure organizational and financial resources.

**Overview**

Kalamazoo Symphony Orchestra's (KSO) mission is to present professional orchestra performances and education programs for audiences throughout southwestern Michigan, fostering lifelong appreciation and support for symphonic music. KSO is the only orchestra serving a six county area in Southwest Michigan, five of which are designated "underserved" in the arts by the state. In recent years, KSO has further developed these relationships into rich partnerships that engage the entire community.

The goals of the Rural Community Program are to:

- Increase arts access, specifically to orchestral music, in outlying venues;
- Increase local arts support in rural communities and within their school districts; and
- Expand the geographic reach of KSO.

Outcomes:

- Strengthening community by enhancing cultural activity, quality of life, school music programs and community pride;
- Greater student/parent involvement with and community support for local school music programs; and
- Increased attendance at KSO concerts from outlying populations.

## Commitment

### Strategic Concepts

- KSO recognizes that "one size does not fit all." In order to develop a program that will best suit the needs of their community, partners must be engaged.
- In uncertain economic times, the KSO diminished the partner's risk by agreeing to assist communities financially if grants are put under a moratorium. This agreement has given communities the confidence to commit to the partnership in uncertain times.

### Professional Development

- KSO continues to develop the administrative capacity to collaborate with and empower rural community arts leaders.

### Leadership in the Community

- As the only orchestra serving a six county area in Southwest Michigan, KSO has connected with rural communities through their education programs. In recent years, KSO has further developed these relationships into rich partnerships that engage the entire community.

- KSO supports music education for students from pre-school through college, providing residencies, internships, scholarships, and master classes at elementary and secondary schools, as well as local colleges.
- KSO musicians bring music to those who cannot attend regular KSO concerts. Musicians travel to retirement homes, senior centers, correctional facilities, and community venues to perform recitals.

## Effective Practices

### Community Engagement

As each community is unique and one program structure does not work for all, the KSO holds team meetings with community leaders to select the key people needed to be successful and determine what education and concert components will best benefit their community.

### Implementation

- The central piece of Rural Community Partnerships is the Community Concert Tour, which brings the KSO into southwest Michigan towns to present concerts that include the local High School Choir and Band in performance with the orchestra.
- KSO provides technical assistance and support for fundraising, marketing, production and education components to enable small rural communities to present professional orchestras.
- This project is jointly funded by the community and KSO. Partner communities cover their portion (approximate 50%) by writing grants to state and local foundations, and attracting local sponsors; some communities charge a ticket fee.
- KSO offers transportation stipends to rural schools to compensate for the elimination of funding for field trip transportation. Many rural schools have eliminated all other field trips but have continued to attend KSO Youth Concerts.
- KSO invites students in nine rural community partner districts to attend Youth Concerts in Kalamazoo without charge. KSO provides complimentary curricular materials and busing scholarships to rural schools.

### Evaluation

- A post-concert team discussion with each community partner allows for evaluation and improvement of the project. These discussions include assessment of the event, audience and student responses, and improvements for the future.

## Challenges

- Michigan, formerly fourth highest in the country for arts funding, has cut support to the point where the state now ranks second from the bottom. Last spring the state placed a moratorium on arts grants pledged but not funded. As state funds diminish, schools and small arts councils are concerned about their ability to secure grant funding.

## Advice

- Develop a clear set of goals for the program that supports the interests and needs of the partner community as well as the mission of the arts organization.
- Have an outline of a program in mind, then listen to your partners to discover what is important to their communities.
- Find dynamo leaders in partner communities and give them all the support they need for implementation.
- Make meaningful connections with the partner community
- Create art together – not “for,” but “with.”
- Make no assumptions; communicate clearly, enthusiastically, and frequently.
- Build something larger than either partner could accomplish on its own.



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