

HAMILTON REGION

Hundreds of students given chance to play instruments through music collective program

An Instrument for Every Child program was “life-changing” for mother and son.

July 10, 2025   



River Evans plays the saxophone last month at Burlington’s Sound of Music Festival.

Heather Cronkwright photo

By Cheyenne Bholla Reporter

Nine years ago, Heather Cronkwright’s son, River Evans, asked if he could learn how to play the violin.

She spent days looking for options that she could afford as a single parent.

“I was really overwhelmed,” said Cronkwright.

Cronkwright skipped over expensive private music schools before she found the after-school program at Hamilton Music Collective.

Evans is now one of hundreds of students who borrow free instruments, from drums to saxophones, through the collective's An Instrument for Every Child (AIFEC) initiative and after-school programs.

"It's life-changing," said Cronkwright. "It gave him something that I would never have been able to do on my own."

The collective launched the program in 2010 to give more families and children access to instruments and music training. The borrowed instruments are used in free classes at select schools through the AIFEC program or in after-school programs offered at a fee of about \$16 per hour.

More than 370 free instruments were loaned out through AIFEC during the 2024-25 school year — the most to date.

"It's providing the enrichment and benefits to kids that can have huge impact down the line, just the developmental benefits of studying an instrument," said Joel Banks, the collective's instrument co-ordinator.

Banks is also an instructor, having taught after-school music classes at the Hamilton Music Collective office on Park Street North and at schools like St. Ann Catholic Elementary School and Hess Street Elementary School.

Now 16 years old, Evans transitioned to playing the saxophone. He performed at Burlington's Sound of Music Festival in June as part of Hamilton Music Collective's Jambassadors group.

He plans to pursue engineering, with a minor in music, in post-secondary school.



River Evans playing the violin at six years old at a Hamilton Music Collective year-end recital.

Heather Cronkwright photo

“He’s very advanced in his music and wouldn’t be without the Hamilton Music Collective,” said Cronkwright.

The collective’s AIFEC program has evolved over time.

Banks joined the collective around 2011, when they originally had musicians perform and do presentations at local schools.

“That gradually evolved into the instruments for every child program where they started bringing local musicians to start giving instrumental lessons to the kids,” said Banks.

Jazz in the Hubs, a concert series featuring jazz, blues and R&B artists, was one of the first initiatives through AIFEC. Proceeds from the event went toward the organization.

Today, the collective randomly chooses multiple roughly 20-student Grade 1 classes from local schools to receive the AIFEC program.

The children then attend the classes during nutrition breaks up to Grade 4.

“The kids who need to borrow instruments to participate in the instrumental lessons can borrow them from us,” said Banks.

The collective also gives students new, bigger instruments when they outgrow the old ones.

Once a week, the Grade 1 students start off learning theory and vocal lessons, before playing instruments in later years.

The program is integral because it offers music lessons at earlier ages than schools usually provide, said Banks.

It also gives children the chance to decide if they enjoy playing instruments.

“For some students, it’s not the right fit and they learn that,” said Banks.

The borrowed instruments come from the collective’s inventory of about 700 instruments, either purchased new from Long and McQuade or donated.

This year’s classes wrapped up with the school year and will resume in October.

After more than a decade with the collective, Banks said he feels proud.

A goal for Banks is to maintain funding to continue offering and expanding the program.

“Teaching music is already fun, but it’s great to be able to bring it to places and children who might not otherwise have easy access to it,” he said.

For more information about the music programs, visit hamiltonmusiccollective.ca.

Cheyenne Bholla is a reporter at The Hamilton Spectator.
cbholla@thespec.com



Cheyenne Bholla

REPORT AN ERROR

JOURNALISTIC STANDARDS

ABOUT THE SPEC
