

# Inclusive Instrumental Music Impacts Psychosocial Outcomes for Students with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities

*Research: Novel, Multisite, School-Based Inclusive Instrumental Music Program with Peer-Mentoring for Students with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities*

MESA, AZ, UNITED STATES, November 6, 2025 /EINPresswire.com/ -- A new peer-reviewed study published in *Advances in Mind-Body Medicine* (ADVANCES, Winter 2026, VOL. 40, NO. 1) found that students with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) experienced significant psychosocial growth when participating in inclusive instrumental music programs with peer mentors.



A United Sound student encouraged by his peer mentor.

The study, “Outcomes Assessment of a Novel, Multisite, School-Based Inclusive Instrumental Music Program with Peer-Mentoring for Students with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities,” was led by neurologist Barry Bittman, MD, Chief Population Health and Strategy Officer for the Inland Empire Foundation for Medical Care, with collaborators Dorean White, Tiffany Bunstein, and Julie Duty (founder and executive director of [United Sound](#)).

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*Julie Duty*

Over the course of a full school year, 60 students with IDD from eight U.S. public schools participated in the United

Sound structured, inclusive instrumental music program. The program’s goal was not only to teach students to play instruments but also to promote confidence, social communication, and emotional growth within a truly inclusive ensemble environment.

## Significant Psychosocial Gains

Using a newly developed Special Education Student Assessment (SESA) designed by a team of experienced special education teachers led by the principal investigator, researchers documented statistically significant improvements across all 10 psychosocial measures, with gains ranging from 8.2% to 29.8%:

- 29.8% - ability to endure stressful environments
- 24.7% - impulse control
- 24.5% - resilience
- 18.8% - self-confidence
- 14.6% - empathy
- 13.2% - pride
- 13.0% - appropriate assertiveness
- 9.8% - willingness to participate in non-preferred activities
- 9.1% - peer-appropriate communications
- 8.2% - positive peer interactions

“These findings are far more than statistics,” said Barry Bittman, MD, Inland Empire Foundation for Medical Care’s Chief Population Health Officer and the study’s principal investigator. “While our research demonstrates a host of statistically significant psychosocial improvements in students with intellectual and developmental disabilities, we should also consider the broader opportunity—fostering their future success through a program that’s affordable, accessible, and sustainable.”

## An Inclusive Model That Benefits All Participants

United Sound’s approach pairs students with IDD— “new musicians”—with volunteer peer mentors from their schools’ existing music programs. Peer mentors receive training through United Sound’s Communicate, Modify, Empower model.

Julie Duty, United Sound’s Founder and Executive Director, noted, “This study, for the very first



A United Sound student supported by his peer mentors



A United Sound student and his peer mentors - friends for life!

time, reveals the benefits of a unique, structured, inclusive instrumental music education program that empowers students with disabilities as well as their peer mentors who become more caring, empathetic, and inclusive.”

One mentor reflected, “This program has made me more patient, understanding, and open-minded. At school, I find myself more supportive and encouraging of others, even outside of music. At home, I’ve become more grateful for the little things and more aware of how important it is to be kind and inclusive. It definitely made me a better person overall.”

### [Bridging Educational Gaps](#)

The study also points to critical implications for education systems. Many music teachers experience burnout early on and report being under-resourced, particularly in inclusive classrooms that often lack the necessary support to engage all learners effectively. By integrating peer mentorship and special education support, United Sound directly addresses these challenges. This program reduces the instructional burden on music teachers while expanding meaningful opportunities for every student.

“Music educators have long sought ways to bring true inclusion into their classrooms without feeling overwhelmed,” said Duty. “United Sound provides a transformational framework where everyone—students with disabilities, peer mentors, and teachers—can thrive together.”

### A Scalable, Sustainable Path Toward National Inclusion

The study’s authors emphasize that these research findings represent a major step toward establishing this inclusive instrumental music program as an integral component of the educational framework in all public schools nationwide.

“This isn’t just about music,” said Dr. Bittman. “It’s about building self-confidence, empathy, impulse control, and resilience—traits that often determine success in life and in the workforce. Inclusive music education is an essential investment in our students’ futures.”

This study was funded by a generous grant from the Yamaha Music and Wellness Institute, a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization.

### [About United Sound](#)

United Sound is a national 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization that provides musical performance experiences for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities through peer mentorship. Operating in hundreds of schools across the United States, United Sound trains music and special education teachers to create inclusive bands and orchestras that celebrate ability and belonging.

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