

# Statesman

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## Advocates rally for East Austin elementary music program

By Margaret Nicklas

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Jose Bustamante's wish list seems simple enough.

He wants a better supply of working instruments and a keyboard to lead his music class in learning notes and songs. He also wants new risers with back and side rails to protect kids from dangerous falls. The school has a set, but they are old, without safety features, and difficult to move.

These may not seem like big requests. But for the children at Mary Jane Sims Elementary in East Austin, they remain out of reach, at least for now.

Bustamante, in his second year of teaching at Sims, said he gets about \$280 a year to spend on his classroom needs, which he has spent on things like a new set of shakers and some sheet music. Beyond that, he's had to spend his own money on additional music kits, which provide sheet music and background tracks, and be creative – like downloading a free track of “What a Wonderful World” off of YouTube.

“We have a large amount of instruments, but a lot of them need to be updated or repaired,” he said. “Just so that every kid can participate, I’ve had to really improvise and pull everything that I can find that works.”

But sometimes the best music is born of improvisation, and this year Bustamante's students are getting help from other music lovers in the community.

In response to Bustamante's call to local businesses for help last fall, David Cardona, owner of Austin Window Tint, bought enough recorders for each fourth and fifth grader at the school. The recorders would normally cost \$6 per student, Bustamante said, money that's hard to come by in a school where 94

percent of the students qualify for free or reduced-price meals.

And now Amberly Russell, a corporate business systems analyst turned community volunteer and advocate, is banging the drum to raise money for the students' music program. She launched a crowdfunding campaign in April through her nonprofit called [envisiondesigncreate.org](http://envisiondesigncreate.org), and the first phase raised almost \$750, enough to buy a digital keyboard for Bustamante.

Round 2, which runs through July 19, aims to raise \$6,000 to buy risers and more musical instruments.

Russell relates to the kids at Sims: She grew up with little money in tiny Blum, about 65 miles southwest of Dallas. She said her school "was underfunded, so we didn't have art or music."

But here in the Live Music Capital of the World, she said, all school children should have access to a high quality music program.

Russell, 33 and an Army vet, got interested in helping the school a few years ago as a volunteer with the Ricky Williams Foundation and later with a veterans service group. In 2012, she spearheaded a landscaping effort and the creation of a butterfly garden. Last year, she facilitated the creation of a colorful mural that overlooks the playground.

The inspiration for each project, she said, is the children, who deserve an environment as vibrant as they are.

"They are really excited when people show that they care," she said.