

When you get to be in third grade at Lafayette you learn to play the recorder. It's the first time for many of our students to blow in an instrument, move their fingers and read music simultaneously. Quite a challenge for our third graders. Reading music is especially interesting. You have to learn the musical alphabet, letters A-G. But you don't get to see the actual letters. Instead you have to learn the names of the lines and spaces of the music staff and then figure out what line or space a note is on and that gives you the right letter. You have to learn that because each note has a different position for your fingers. Then you need to figure out the value of each note. Fractions help here, with whole, half and quarter notes being the first ones learned. In common time it's pretty easy. Four beats for a whole note, two for a half and one for a quarter. Making sense out of fractions. Now all you have to do is blow and make a reasonably nice sound and you've got it made. Whoa. This is Lafayette. Now you've got to get through Recorder karate.

Recorder karate is a series of pieces that have been selected to be learned as students learn how to play the recorder. Everyone starts out at the white belt level with Three Blind Mice or Hot Cross Buns. Up through the colors they move. Blue belt has you learn Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star. Finally you reach Black Belt and Ode to Joy. For each level you actually earn a belt to tie on your recorder (actually a little piece of yarn in the appropriate color). By the time you get to black belt, there is as lovely fringe of colors at the bottom of your instrument, tangible proof of what you have mastered.

Next week, on December 7, the third grade recorder students will be performing for their parents at 2 p.m. in the cafeteria. Recorder karate will be on display as various groups of students perform songs at their skill level. All students will be playing the white and yellow level songs. Onward the groups will move to the purple and red ones. At the end will be the black belt extreme students. These are students who have completed the entire sequence and are moving even farther along. But everyone has learned to finger, blow and read music.

I get to hear a lot of recorder karate from my office. Let me tell you there is a special place in heaven for beginning music teachers. There are some days I really wonder what the name of that piece is. Students come at lunch and after school to pass their tests and earn another belt. Recorders here, there and everywhere. Encouragement all around as students are complemented on the progress they are making. And then one day it all changes, clicks maybe, and an actual melody appears. A known tune. And it actually sounds pretty good. There is a lot of pride on display when another belt is added to the bottom of a recorder. Another color. Another task accomplished. More music to learn.

So if you visit the school while the third grade is in music class you just might hear some recorder music. At other times of the day you might hear the xylophones or drums. At lunch we have band and percussion instruments along with guitars being played. Lots of different ways to make music. Sometimes by yourself. Sometimes with a group. And sometimes even with recorder karate!