

# Music Therapist

Making

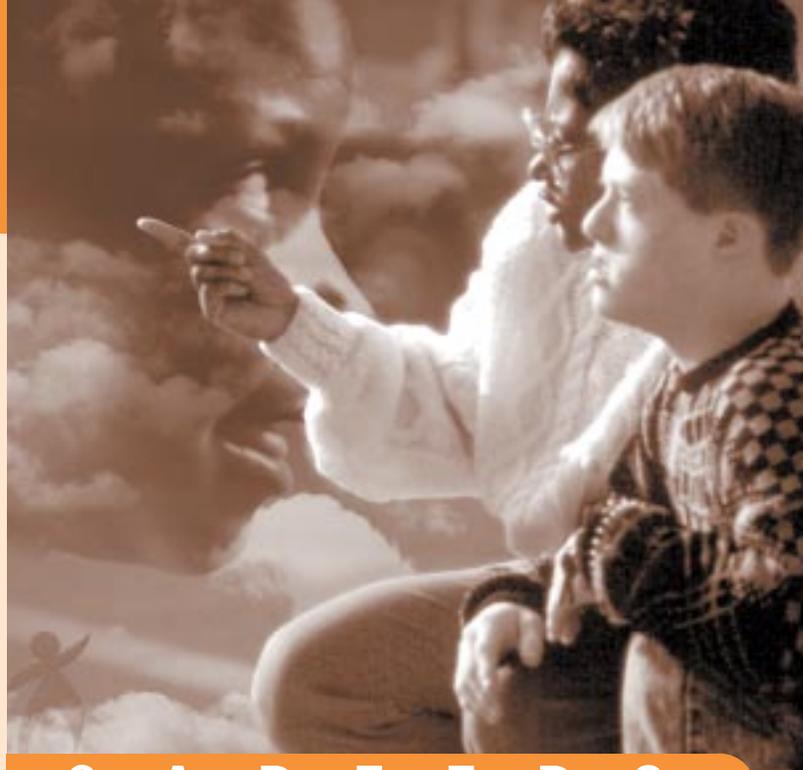
A

**DIFFERENCE** in the **lives**  
of **students** with  
**special needs**

*Rachel, a sixth grader, is hard of hearing and wears two hearing aids. She likes music and wishes she could play an instrument in the school band next year. Her parents, however, have reservations about whether their daughter can hear well enough to play with a group of students. Can Rachel look forward to band in middle school?*

*Pablo, age eight, is physically active and has excellent hearing and sight. Because of severe cognitive disabilities, Pablo does not read or write yet and he has difficulty following directions. Can he benefit from a school music program?*

*Cory's dream is to perform with the school choir on its spring concert tour in six months. This 15-year-old who has cerebral palsy has been singing in general music class for years, but he's worried about the logistics of traveling with a wheelchair. He doesn't know the choir director and is afraid to ask questions. Is there someone who can help him realize his dream?*



C A R E E R S

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The answer is yes to all three questions, and the person most qualified to address these issues is a music therapist. Music therapists plan, organize, and direct music activities that may produce behavior changes in persons who have mental, emotional, or physical disabilities.

## Nature of Work

Music enriches a person's life, regardless of age, race, or mental and physical abilities. While many music therapists are employed in psychiatric hospitals and rehabilitative facilities, school systems are increasingly recognizing the value of including music therapy in their curriculum. Music therapists often foster and develop an appreciation and love for music with students who have disabilities.

From their clinical knowledge, music therapists develop both short- and long-term programs for students with disabilities. For some students, music therapy goals are included in the student's Individualized Education Program (IEP). Often these goals assist students to develop musical interests or other talents they might not have had the opportunity to develop before. Examples of some model music therapy interventions show the effects of music therapy.

- Students with mental disabilities will stand and sit on cue with other members of the high school chorus.
- Students with vision impairments will improve their spatial awareness.
- Students who are deaf or hard of hearing may show an awareness, understanding and appreciation of music.
- Students with physical disabilities will improve their fine motor skills by grasping, holding, and manipulating musical instruments or other objects.
- Students in preschool classes will increase their ability to recognize letters and numbers.

**How are these objectives met?** With teamwork. Requests for music therapy come from administrators, classroom teachers, speech-language pathologists, occupational therapists, general and special education music instructors, and parents. Depending on how the school's program is structured, music therapists serve only students with disabilities, all students in selected integrated/inclusive classrooms, or a combination of both.

**In the examples above** with Rachel, Pablo, and Cory, a music therapist might:

- Consult with Rachel's audiologist for a current audiological assessment of her hearing loss with hearing aids. If learning an instrument is an option, the therapist would meet Rachel and her parents and possibly demonstrate the choice of available instruments. A future visit could be arranged between Rachel and another band member with a hearing loss to help her understand that there are deaf and hard of hearing students in bands. The music therapist could be available to attend band rehearsals and provide additional practice sessions, if necessary, to ensure Rachel had a successful experience in the band. If Rachel decides to enroll in band, her school study team will also be notified.
- Review Pablo's medical records and IEP with his counselor and primary special education teacher. The music therapist may decide to observe Pablo in one or more classes before developing a program for him. Since Pablo likes physical activity and has good vision and hearing, he might enjoy dancing, clapping to music, or playing instruments. Pablo might also enjoy identifying high or low sounds in music. Calming types of music might increase Pablo's ability to concentrate.
- Meet Cory to learn more about his concerns. First, is he eligible for the school choir that will be touring? Does he need to audition? If so, the music therapist could meet with Cory's music teacher and/or choir director to obtain

additional details. The music therapist would know, or could research, which type of wheelchairs are best suited for the touring vehicles and whether the concert facilities are accessible. Regardless of whether Cory participates in the tour, the music therapist would encourage Cory to continue singing, because the music therapist's primary goal is to encourage students to experience music.

**One of the benefits of music therapy in schools** is that children with disabilities are offered new ways in which to excel. Some youngsters, for example, have convinced themselves that they "can't sing." Perhaps reading notes is a struggle or maybe following a director's motions is confusing.

**If these students with disabilities** are enrolled in a general music class, they may become even more withdrawn. Joining a band or chorus is unthinkable for students who have no confidence and are sure they have few if any, musical skills. A music therapist can give a child individual attention and stress the repetition that's needed to acquire certain skills. Students with disabilities may need more practice time than their classmates: Through creative teaching, music therapists can help them experience pride and success in band or music class.

**After students achieve a degree of skill in music**, some join performing groups at school or in the community. "I've observed students perform, and the benefits are amazing," remarked one music therapist. "Many cry the first time they get a standing ovation or applause. They are so overwhelmed at that type of approval. People talk to them after the performances, and the students respond. These students often learn new social and academic skills that can be applied and used later in jobs."

**"Our hard of hearing daughter loves music and rhythm,"** said one mother whose daughter is now a young adult. "In one school she attended, the principles of eurhythmics were taught; and the whole student body would assemble for singing and dancing. These sessions became a real sensory-motor high; and of all the classes she ever took, the music classes are the ones she talks about the most."

## Education Required

**A bachelor's degree is the minimum requirement.** Most music therapists have undergraduate degrees in music, education, music therapy, psychology, or special education. In addition, completion of an approved music therapy program is a requirement in many school systems.

**In 1996, approximately 70 colleges and universities** offered undergraduate degrees in music therapy; 12 offered master's degrees. Graduates are accomplished in piano, voice, and guitar, and have completed a supervised internship. Certification has become increasingly important in this profession. The Certification Board for Music Therapists offers the Board-Certified Music Therapist (MT-BC).

## PRACTITIONER'S PROFILE



**Brenda J. Rice**  
**Music Therapist**  
**Tallahassee, Florida**

Brenda Rice is a full-time music therapist in the Tallahassee, Florida school system. During the 1996-97 school year, approximately 1,300 students received music therapy services. Brenda works with both exceptional children and general education students in educational settings. Trained as a violinist, but also active in community choral groups, Brenda received a bachelor's degree in music education in 1979 from Boston University. During her first years as a music teacher, Brenda's class included students with disabilities. She wanted them to have richer musical experiences, so she later entered a graduate program in music therapy. Brenda earned a master's degree in music education and certification in music therapy from the University of Kansas.

For her contributions to the field of music therapy, Brenda has received the Florida Federation "Teacher of the Year Award" and the "Teacher of the Year" from The Council for Exceptional Children. She is a contributing author to *Models of Music Therapy Interventions in School Settings*, published in 1996, by the National Association for Music Therapy, Inc.

Brenda is a member of a music therapy staff that consists of another board certified music therapist and includes as many as four music therapy interns at any time of the year. Since the music therapy staff participates in the American Music Association Clinical Training Program, it is able to obtain interns from universities throughout the United States. Brenda divides her time among classroom teaching, supervising the interns, and consulting with music and special education teachers.

**Daily Schedule:** At the beginning of the school year, classroom teachers are invited to request the services of a music therapist. From this list, music therapy schedules are

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determined. Brenda and the music therapy staff may spend six weeks or six months in a single school. Brenda might work with a second grade class comprised of exceptional students and general education students. While studying Native American music and playing instruments, one child might have difficulty keeping a steady rhythm. Brenda might suggest that he play a rattle or shaker along with some of his classmates. Such instruments, even if they are not played precisely to the beat, would blend in nicely with the style of the music.

"Regardless of age or ability, all of our students benefit from music," stated Brenda. "I have had wonderful opportunities to see music come alive in our exceptional children — students who are blind singing in choruses, playing piano and guitar; students who are deaf or hard of hearing performing in school bands, choruses, and other ensembles. Students with disabilities and exceptionalities who can perform music with a group benefit by feeling part of a team and experiencing the thrill of accomplishment."

**Challenges:** "Maybe the biggest frustration is too many meetings and not having enough time to accomplish everything I want to do in this job! In addition, it's a big challenge to stay current in this profession, because special education and music therapy research is constantly bringing us new and exciting materials, methods, and techniques."

**Satisfaction:** "I love the variety in my job. In school, I work with children from birth to young adults. It's very rewarding as a music therapist to see that I can make a difference in a child's life. When preschoolers who are deaf or hard of hearing sing in a class program, for example, I often see the parents in the audience near tears. Sometimes it takes a long time for me to get a response from a child who has a disability. But when you see a child understanding and enjoying music, it's very exciting."

For some of these parents, it is an eye opening experience to see their child singing and enjoying music the same way as other children. Students learn and do different activities at different rates. Music therapy is a wonderful way to see them learn, grow, and develop new skills from learning just one musical beat!

## Personal Qualities

Music therapists genuinely enjoy a wide range of musical styles and are technically competent in music theory and composition. They are patient, creative, and resourceful, and they are committed to helping others benefit from musical experiences. Music therapists work well independently but collaborate willingly with many special education professionals. They have excellent organizational skills and can quickly improvise therapy treatment if necessary.

## Job Outlook and Advancement

Employment of all special education teachers, including music therapist positions, is expected to increase much faster than the average for all occupations through the year 2005. According to the U.S. Department of Labor, special education and related services job openings will result from educational reform, legislation, growing public interest in individuals with special needs, and the continued growth in the number of students needing services.

Music therapists with advanced degrees can move into supervisory positions in school systems, do research, or teach at the college level. Private practice is also an option for music therapists.

## How to Prepare for a Career

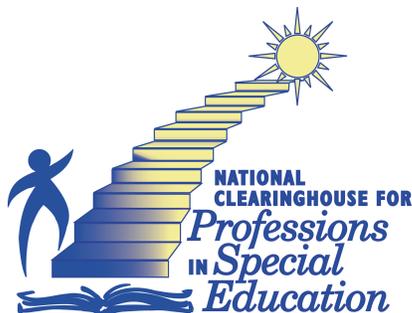
Participate in as many school and community music activities as possible. Sing and learn to play at least one instrument. Volunteer to work with children and music in day care centers, summer recreation programs, and community theater events. Contact the special education administrator in your school system and ask if a music therapist is on the staff. If so, request an appointment with the music therapist and ask about the profession.

High school students interested in music therapy should take a variety of music classes (including music theory) as well as courses in science, English, communications, and psychology.

## RESOURCES

### American Music Therapy Association, Inc.

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Silver Spring, MD 20910  
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info@musictherapy.org  
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www.special-ed-careers.org



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