Therapeutic for the soul, music is a source of inspiration, motivation and comfort. All it takes is the push of a button or a swipe on our phones to cue up an anthem to lift us up, carry us through a tough time or simply add to the soundtrack of our lives. But while access to music is easier than ever, access to music education is out of reach for far too much of America’s youth.

Each year, according to the U.S. Department of Education, more than 2 million public school students in the United States are denied a music education due to a lack of funding to keep the program a part of their curriculum. Fortunately for kids enrolled in Chicago Public Schools—who are no strangers to big budget cuts—there’s Intonation (intonationmusic.org), the Bronzeville-based organization dedicated to helping kids amplify their potential by providing instruments, instruction and mentorship.

Founded in 2006 by Michael Simons—with a carful of his own instruments, a volunteer slot at a local community center, and a hunch that learning to play and perform the music they love would be a rewarding experience for kids—Intonation knows that there’s no denying the power of a music education. According to the National Association of Music Merchants, music education improves literacy and math skills among children, and makes them more likely to excel in all areas of their education while encouraging creative thinking and boosting confidence. And for kids 9 and under, music education is instrumental in improving language development, which is crucial during one’s formative years in terms of establishing a foundation for higher learning.

Community stressors are a factor, too. “Many Chicago kids are experiencing various forms of physical and emotional trauma due to challenges within their environment,” says Simons, who serves as Intonation’s executive director. “We create a safe space for kids where their voices are heard, their opinions matter and it’s OK to try something and fail as long as you throw that guitar strap back over your shoulder and give it another try tomorrow.”

With a focus on Chicago’s mid-South Side, Intonation offers year-round classes to third graders through high schoolers in partnership with Chicago Public Schools, UChicago Charter School, The Chicago Park District (Kennicott, Taylor and Fuller Parks so far) and other organizations like Embarc and After-School Matters. Students are provided with instruments and the opportunity to learn from a diverse group of instructors and professional musicians. And at the end of day one, no matter what instrument they’re holding, each Intonation student gets the gratification of being able to play their first beat or riff.

“Many pop songs are a basic sequence of chords,” says Simons, who grew up playing the bass guitar and the drums. “When broken down, the melodies are simple and very teachable. Kids pick up the tunes by ear and, within a matter of minutes, can play. It’s an incredibly empowering moment that can spark a lifelong love for music.”

But playing a beat is just the beginning. Intonation students learn about commitment, patience, teamwork and compromise by showing up each week and making decisions about the life of their band together, such as which song they want to learn and perform. From there, the song is dissected so the kids can understand the context and learn the component parts on the instruments. Past choices have included chart-topping hits like “Hotline Bling” by Drake and “Uptown Funk” by Bruno Mars (edited for PG ears, natch).
Today, the Intonation program is available in seven South Side Chicago schools (Burke Elementary, Hendricks Elementary and Pershing Magnet School, to name a few) and grants music education to 600 youth per year. The organization is powered by five full-time staff members, 10 executive board members and 20 instructors. This year, an expected 17,000 instruction and performance hours will be logged by Intonation students. Proof of the program’s impact is in the numbers, but it also vibrates off the success stories of its students who have gone on to enroll in highly selective creative arts high schools, like The Chicago High School for the Arts, and land acceptance letters from prestigious arts colleges.

Take for example Intonation grad Caira McGhee. Now 18 years old and studying music at Dillard University in New Orleans, McGhee joined the program when she was in middle school at CICS Bucktown. At Intonation, she formed two bands, The Scorps and TIOTE, and became a founding member of the Intonation All-Stars (an advanced, year-round show-band program for students who have the skills and passion to take their musicianship to the next level). Last year, McGhee and her bandmates recorded an album, made a music video and performed at the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame in Cleveland. Other Intonation students have performed at Lollapalooza, Lincoln Hall and Navy Pier. “We place an incredibly high value on performance,” says Simons. “All of their hard work comes together in that moment and the kids experience the connection between the effort they’ve put in and the wave of energy they get back from the crowd.”

But it takes a village, or in this case a community, to keep the beat going for these young students. In the summer of 2016, Pearl Jam gave $1 from every ticket sold during the band’s sold-out shows at Wrigley Field—a grand total of $40,000—to Intonation. The members of Wilco have collectively raised more than $150,000 for the organization (in addition to donating their personal time to work hands-on with Intonation’s student bands over the years). And Chicagoan and arts champion Chance the Rapper’s Social Works supports the organization by funding a three-year partnership with Burke Elementary via his New Chance Arts and Literature Fund.

And fundraising is already in full swing for this year: Intonation’s Amplify 2018 Gala will be held at the newly renovated Theater on the Lake at Fullerton Beach on Thursday, April 26. Guests can expect cocktails, dinner, student performances, one-of-a-kind silent and live auction items, and a few yet-to-be-announced surprises. As for a second set, “Intonation has plans underway to expand its reach and deepen its impact through collaborative partnerships with colleague organizations and music industry stalwarts,” says founding board member and current treasurer Brian Black. “This year, for example, Intonation is joining forces with Live Nation on a pilot program working with students at Dyett High School for the Arts to explore the plethora of career paths in music and related industries.” Bringing Intonation to more Chicago Public Schools and infiltrating its curriculum into more neighborhoods is up there on the priority list as well.

“We believe every kid is a rock star,” says Simons. “Playing music together is a way to unite people. It’s intuitive and can create a shared experience and transcend barriers where words sometimes fail. We’re thrilled when our students become top-notch musicians, but our real goal is to be a conduit for them to become top-notch individuals and citizens.”