Stonehammer: unique in location, development

I wish I could have been in the hall, foursixelement-school band pounds out a rhythm with the notes. Next door, a bucket band pounds out a rhythm on inverted plastic tubs. Across the hall, fourelement-school students perch on stools behind their kettles, cautiously learning over the huge bodies of their instruments like they’ve been playing them all their lives.

It is a typical day at Saint John’s Sistema Centre. Since September, about 40 students, most aged seven or eight, have spent three hours a day, five days a week at Hazen White St. Francis School, learning to become part of a community. “I think I could have been in Sistema,” Aaron McFarlane, the centre’s verdant, energetic director, who moved to Saint John from New England for the job, said.

Growing up in Montreal, his own music education of private lessons and hours of isolated practice was “dreadful,” he said.

The secret to Sistema’s success, he said, is everything is done as a group. "I just wish we could take our violins home on the weekend," Andon Bright, a Grade 6 student, said. "We have practiced and re-practiced the palette and still can’t do it."