

All-State: Kathy Fishburn — Advocacy

reported by Sarah Chelgren

After a disappointing spring in terms of budget and program cuts in many school districts, Kathy Fishburn's clinic session on advocacy couldn't have come at a more appropriate time. Fish-

burn, a string educator and national clinician from Texas, presented the teachers with some valuable resources used by music educators in a state known for its stellar instrumental pro-

grams.

Fishburn distributed a special publication from the *Southwestern Musician* and *Texan Music Educator* that focuses on "Quality Music Education in

How to Lobby a School Board in Time of Crisis

(Based on an article Strategies for Effective Lobbying by Joanna Newhouse, Action Chairperson, Los Angeles City Elementary School Music Association. Distributed by Kathy Fishburn at the All-State session Advocacy for Our Music Programs.)

1. **Redefine the situation.** The "crisis" is also an opportunity to educate school boards and other decision makers about the value of music education.
2. **Prepare your arguments carefully.** Your message is: Music belongs in the core curriculum. Be adamant on this issue. But the majority of concerns are going to be related to funding. Know the budget and be prepared to talk about "bang for the educational buck." Let them know how much support you have.
3. **Visit each board member separately.** Keep the visit positive. You are for students and better education, not against anything. They are not villains. They are potential allies.
4. **Never argue against someone else's program.** Show that you are willing to work for the good of all students. Keep the discussion student centered, not teacher-job centered.
5. **Keep current.** Understand the pressures they are under and the tough decisions they have to make. Attend meetings regularly and report back to your group.
6. **Become a source of solid information.** Local board members have a hard time keeping up on all the issues. They need you to tell them exactly what's happening in specific schools and programs. Use information to build trust.
7. **Never lie or "fudge."** Once found out, you will never be trusted again. Your long-term credibility is too precious to squander simply to gain a short-term advantage.
8. **Work to reelect board members who support music education.** Their support should beget yours.
9. **Invite board members to student musical events.** Encourage them to experience the results of their support. Introduce them as a "friend of school music" at these events. If appropriate, ask them to say a few words. It helps them vote your way next time.
10. **Anticipate crises by:**
 - Having a telephone tree is place for quick response to network hundreds of phone calls in a 24-hour period (revise annually).
 - Having a "speaker's bureau" poised to talk to community groups, visit school decision makers, and speak at board meetings. You will need many back-up speakers to cover canceled/rescheduled meetings.
11. **Conduct a telephone campaign before the big meeting.** Petitions are okay, but letters and calls just before the meeting carry more weight. All board members should get several calls. If your school administration uses an e-mail system, send letters directly to board members. Don't use form letters. Encourage supporters to make specific points, but in their own words.
12. **Learn school boardroom etiquette.** Know the rules of the school boardroom (e.g. public comment scheduling, rules on signs, time limits on remarks, etc.). Observe them closely. Address people by their proper title. Be respectful.
13. **Use the "1-2-3 punch" rotation to schedule your speakers.**
 - 1) A parent speaks about the value of school music education and its value to his/her child
 - 2) A student speaks in his/her own words ("I came myself, not because my parents or teacher sent me") about effect of cuts — "What music means to me personally."
 - 3) A music teacher or university professor speaks to the educational value of music and its power in the curriculum. Repeat the cycle.
14. **Cover all points, but don't repeat yourself.** Speaker after speaker talking about "how wonderful school music is" gets real old real fast. Address issues from many different directions. Provide a broad spectrum of information. Key emotion to facts, not opinions. Do your homework.
15. **Fill the board room.** Numbers count; think in hundreds.
16. **Follow up with "Thank you" notes to administrators and board members for their positive comments and support.** Don't be a sore loser. Thank even those who didn't vote with you; there will be other battles.
17. **Be proud of your work.** Take control. Plan, analyze, and act professionally.

Texas.” This is a good resource is someone is looking for hard data to present to a school board or administration. It is divided into three main sections.

The first section is called “Why is Music Important.” This section highlights the value of music for each child in the schools. One of the helpful items here is the legendary comparison of SAT scores for 1994–1999 for students in the Texas All-State ensembles to the state and national averages.

The second section relates to the Texas school music program, and is a set of standards for a “basic” music program and a “quality” music program. The section discusses all music areas at the elementary and secondary levels — choral, classroom, orchestra and band. It deals with scheduling, size of rehearsal areas, number of ensembles per school, equipment, etc., and it is helpful to see the

division between what is considered basic and what is considered quality.

The third section is a pull-out booklet. The Texas Music Educators Association (TMEA) prepared the *Texas Coalition for Music Education Advocacy Tool Kit* as a resource for teachers who need to defend a program to an administration. It includes several helpful articles about music and budgets. *Music Advocacy — Opportunity, Responsibility, Leadership* by Robert Morrison is especially interesting because it highlights how change can be made by using the “games” that politicians play, rather than relying solely on the argument that music is important and therefore should be funded.

The Tool Kit also includes information on how to form a local coalition and how to lobby a school board in time of crisis. There is a sample peti-

tion sheet, a *Declaration of Concern About Music Education* statement, and a flyer that many districts could adapt to their own purposes. The sample letters to politicians and administrators are well-written and helpful for busy teachers. At the back of the booklet, there is a list of prepared advocacy tools distributed by MENC and a list of advocacy websites.

Additional copies are available by contacting the TMEA office, www.tmea.org or 1-888-318-TMEA. Unfortunately, these materials came too late for some programs in Minnesota, but the resources still may help other programs in the next round of budget cuts.

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