

Clinic: Three Keys to Music Advocacy

by Dr. John L. Benham

There are three key components that provide for successful advocacy for a strong music program within a public school district: Parent Power, Professional Unity, and Process.

Parent Power

Basic to the security of the music curriculum in any district is strong community support. *Education is politics!* A community-wide Music Coalition is fundamental to that process. The Music Coalition must be a unified body of parents and community members that provides balanced representation of all areas of the music curriculum: general music, band, choir and orchestra. This provides the strongest political base, or voting bloc; and is particularly necessary in a school district in which the public voice has been excluded from the decision-making process by the administration and school board, either by intent or default.

The law assigns to the public the right and responsibility for establishing district policy through its elected school board. As the (music) community expresses its desire, it becomes the responsibility of the board to establish policy and make sure that the district employees (the administration, et al.) carry out that policy. This includes a policy that establishes the right of a music education for all children.

Parents are our greatest untapped resource of advocacy; and, unfortunately are often restricted to the role of fund-raising. It is time to facilitate their role as advocates. *Remember:* Advocacy simply means that you care enough to put the child first! And parents do that best!

Organize your Music Coalition into groups or committees that have representation from each school in your district and provide for:

- Membership recruitment
- Mailing list and telephone bank development
- Publication of a district music newsletter
- Representation at site school and

- parent meetings
- Representation at all board meetings
- Establishment of district music policies and philosophies

“The decision belongs to those who show up.” - D. Morrow

Professional Unity

One of the greatest detriments to the advancement of educational opportunities in music is a competitive presence within the profession that often leads to professional disunity. Such conditions only make the music curriculum more vulnerable to cuts. If those wishing to eliminate music from curriculum can divide us, it makes their job much easier.

One of the first signs of danger is the presence of a vocabulary that includes “My band,” “My choir,” or “My orchestra.” It is important that we remember that we are only employees of the district. Our mission is not teaching or becoming “the conductor.” It is making sure that each student is provided with a music education and *is* learning. The issue is “Music...For all Students!”

Therefore, we must carefully evaluate how we are presenting ourselves to the community as curricular, co-curricular and/or extra-curricular.

Generally, “curricular” refers to music classes/performing organizations that are held during the school day and apply music as a tool in the intellectual, emotional and social development of the student.

“Co-curricular” refers to those outcomes of curricular music instruction that result in the performance or application of those materials learned during the school day at an event outside the school day, e.g., the performance of a Brahms Symphony by the orchestra at an evening concert. This performance may equate to the “final exam” for a music organization.

“Extra-curricular” is a term applied to those activities of a musical organization that may be the result of curricular involvement in music, but which are



primarily public service or public relations in nature, e.g., the orchestra performing at a function for the local Kiwanis or Lions Club. Others would include service to or at athletic events.

Your district needs to adopt these standards and definitions, or develop its own to assist in the decision-making process and the development of curricular policy. Unfortunately, most decision-makers observe us when we are extra-curricular and make their judgment to cut music based upon that fact.

The absence of a written sequential curriculum with a system of assessment and reporting of student achievement (beyond A, B, etc.) often leads administrators, boards and even parents to the assumption that nothing really *academic* occurs during music instruction.

Remember: Never fall into the trap of suggesting cuts or compromise ... unless you are prepared to take the blame! Make impact statements: “If the administration or board cut _____, then _____ will happen to the faculty, the curriculum, student opportunities for participation, and the budget.”

Process

You must learn the procedures that take place during any decision-making process in your district. Learn the vocabulary (SFR, FTE, General Fund, etc.). Learn the timeline. For example, the decision-making process on budget

issues is usually driven by the following factors and dates.

- *Early fall* — initial budget projections and ramifications based upon legislative action or speculation that may lead to a tax referendum or development of the initial cut list
- *January* — first public awareness of impending cuts, usually driven by the need to get secondary school registration materials out so that teacher needs can be determined
- *March or April* — teachers to be “pink-slipped” must be notified
- *June* — Final adoption (vote) of budget by board
- *September* — reinstatement of positions as changes in actual budget balance are “discovered”

Enrollment data needs to be maintained within your district. This information should include the FTE and student load data for each music teacher, and the number of students involved

in each of their classes (by grade level). These figures can then be used to provide a profile of student involvement in music and an FTE financial value for your music teachers. With this data you will be able to demonstrate your financial viability to the district; and, depending on your enrollment profile, you should be able to demonstrate that the district has no financial justification for eliminating your program.

For assistance with the development of your case you may contact Dr. John L. Benbam directly at miwcbenhamj@hotmail.com or at (651) 635-8015.

John Benbam is a well-known consultant in music education, advocacy and crisis intervention. His success in saving school music programs across the United States and Canada has been documented in numerous magazines. He received the MMEA Distinguished Service Award in 1994 for helping many programs in Minnesota in the 1990's. ‡

John Benbam's manuscript How to Save Your School Music and Arts Programs — A Handbook for the Arts Advocate, is available for purchase from Music In World Cultures, Inc., 6425 County Rd 30, St. Bonifacius MN, 55375-9002. The 130-page handbook is revised regularly to provide the most current information on hot topics such as block scheduling and school-to-work. It contains information on how to collect and interpret data, and how to prepare and present a proposal to save music. Many examples show how a bureaucrat's hope to save money by eliminating music will usually mean spending more money in a few years! Sample proposals show how you can save money and save program integrity, save student opportunities and save teachers. MNSOTA owns one copy of this manuscript, which teachers can borrow by contacting Julie Guerber. But we recommend you purchase your own copy for your shelf; prepare your defense before you are threatened.