

SAVING THE ORCHESTRA PROGRAM

The Marshall Story

by Diane Wright

Marshall is city located in Southwest Minnesota with a population of 13,000. It has been the home of Southwest Minnesota State University and the Southwest Minnesota Orchestra for more than 35 years. This year we moved into a new \$42 million High School with a state-of-the-art Performing Arts Theater and Athletic Facility. Our largest employer, the Schwan Food Company, donated \$5 million and the land where the school is located. Marshall is also unique in SW Minnesota because orchestra has been included in a comprehensive music program in Marshall Public Schools since 1974. I began teaching orchestra in Marshall in 1977. My job started at halftime with 40 students in grades 4 through 8. It expanded to full time when the number of students increased to 180. Until last year the high school band or choir director taught the high school orchestra students.

On Monday, April 25, 2005, the principal at our middle school happened to see me in the hallway and mentioned he would like to talk to me about something. The first time I had available was after our fiddle band rehearsal at 4:00 P.M. It was then that he told me that the entire orchestra program was on the list of budget reductions that would be considered at the school board meeting the following day. Because this was the first any of our music teachers in the district had heard of this I questioned him as to whether it would be voted upon or just discussed. He said either could happen. I asked if it was necessary to invite the public to the meeting and he said no. My husband and I attended the school board meeting the following evening. Very few people were at the meeting and agendas were not shared. We waited about one and one half hours until the item was on the agenda. We had no written material and had no idea what was being cut. One school board member attempted to make other suggestions such as administrative cuts. No ideas were discussed. We interrupted the meeting and asked to see the document being discussed. Our school superintendent who had been in our district only a few months offered us his copy. While we were looking at it the board voted to accept the list of cuts that had been recommended by the administration. We were stunned. The

previous year a music teacher resigned and was not replaced. As a result we had lost our general music program in grades 7 and 8 and I had been assigned orchestra 4–12. My schedule included traveling in my car to 5 different locations daily to teach 7 orchestra classes. Lessons for orchestra students were also discontinued the previous year but band students would continue to receive lessons. Now with one day notice the entire orchestra program was cut.

Immediately after the meeting I telephoned Beth Habicht a long time friend and colleague who teaches orchestra in Worthington, MN. I knew she had gone through this many times in her district. She advised me to find a person in our community who was willing to coordinate parents and interested people to work to reinstate the program. The issue needed to be about saving the program and not be focused on me as the teacher. I was very fortunate to find an excellent person who was passionately committed to the task. She had been involved in administrative tasks with our community orchestra and her son played string bass in the 8th grade orchestra. She did a fantastic job coordinating and orchestrating many of the activities that happened. We spent many hours communicating throughout the process. Our goal was to keep people focused on remaining positive and respectful during the entire campaign. It was so easy to be resentful and angry but Marshall is a small town and we knew we needed to continue to live and work together whatever the outcome would be.

The news of the cut was in the front page of the local newspaper the next day. It was the most difficult day. The high school students were devastated. They felt betrayed. It seemed not to matter that they had investments in time and instruments. We had long discussions about what we could do. They needed to talk. I remember distinctly one student saying, "They just don't care about us." We would certainly find out if that was true in the days to come. We did not talk about it with the younger students unless they brought it up. I knew they did not understand what was going on and I didn't want them to feel discouraged. The high school students wanted to do fund raisers and several community people

suggested getting local business to sponsor the program. I felt this was not a good idea. If the community valued the program then it needed to continue in the school curriculum.

The following are the things we did that helped save the program:

- Students and community members started several petitions. They were circulated at school and many students, not only those in orchestra, signed them.
- The main adult-sponsored petition was placed at the local music store so people could conveniently find it.
- It was suggested that people call the school board members and the superintendent. We had heard that they were counting the calls. Names and telephone numbers to call were distributed to people when they signed the petitions. We were thrilled to hear that board members were inundated with calls.
- Because this was at the end of the school year the various school orchestras would be performing at five concerts in May. A parent volunteer came forward during each concert and invited interested people to meet after the concert to discuss the issue and volunteer their help. People were very supportive. The orchestras received standing ovations at every concert after the cut was made and students were so kind to present me with cards and flowers.
- The news traveled quickly to alumni and two days after the announcement letters to the editor began appearing in the local newspaper. Numerous letters supporting the program were printed for twenty-three consecutive days. Our newspaper also wrote several articles specifically on this issue and placed them in prominent areas in the paper. The newspaper personnel commented they had never received so many letters in favor of an issue. There were no letters that supported the elimination of the orchestra program.
- The rationale the administration used to eliminate the program concerned

the number of students in orchestra. There were fewer numbers of string students compared to band students. I prefer so say the there are fewer numbers of string students compared to wind and percussion. I researched this and found this is true in many districts. I saw no reason why this needed to be the issue. The one board member who did not vote for the cut created a document that showed the percentage of students that I work with was comparable to that of the elementary and JH band directors. Of course I travel to 5 buildings daily to see those students!

- A parent did the following very helpful project. She invited every student to draw a picture of their instrument and include their first name, grade, and instrument name on the picture. She placed the completed posters in businesses and public places all over town. We still see these even today.
- There was also some support given to the band teacher who would be eliminated if the orchestra position was cut. I wanted to make sure the issue was not about me. I would still have a teaching job in the district. It was about whether our district would

retain the orchestra program. It was not easy to stay out of the spotlight.

A week before the next school board meeting, a group of prominent individuals in our community met with the superintendent and the finance committee of the school board. I believe that a decision was made at this meeting to reinstate the orchestra program. We could not be sure so we pressed on. We were told that an agenda item to amend the final reductions would be included at the next school board meeting on May 24, 2005. We then called all parents and interested parties and encouraged them to attend the meeting. A group met one hour before this meeting to plan strategy. We decided the order for several people to speak. At the meeting we had to wait again for about 2 hours for our agenda item to occur. I was the first of ten people to speak which included students, parents, and others. Kirk Moss from the U of MN Moorhead spoke and brought a national perspective to the issue. Dr. Daniel Reippel of Southwest MN State University spoke on behalf of our community orchestra. After this the board voted unanimously to reinstate the program and received a standing ovation.

Throughout the process I was in contact with many people from MNSOTA

and ASTA. I received much support and am deeply grateful for all your suggestions and help. Though the whole episode was very distressing and difficult to endure, the outcome was very gratifying. The process showed that our community strongly supported the program and they convinced the school board and administration that it is very important to seek community input first before making these decisions. Only a few people originally made the decision and it affected many. It is interesting that 5 out of 7 members of our local school board resigned this fall and new members have just been elected. I hope this article will be of help to anyone who must face a similar situation but I sincerely hope that no school will have to endure what we went through. String instruments are a vital part of a comprehensive instrumental music program. We need to remain diligent in reinforcing this among all decision makers in our schools.

Diane Wright currently teaches 121 string students in 6 orchestras in grades 4–12. In 1998 she received the Master Teacher for School Orchestra award from MNSOTA for her outstanding work in the Marshall schools. Diane also serves as principal violist with the Southwest Minnesota Orchestra. ♪