

All-State: Models of Musical Assessment for Strategic, Intentional, and Sustainable Growth in the String Program

presented by Dr. Stephen Benham.

reported by Kathryn Liebenow, Clare Chopp and Janet Anderson

Professor of Music Education from Duquesne University in Pittsburgh Pennsylvania, Stephen Benham presented a session on assessment. If we want our classes to be valid in education like all other classes we need to have clear and measurable assessments. The purpose of assessment is to not only document and report out, but also provide communication to the students and parents as to the goals and expectations to be attained. It was clear that assessment is not meant to be an “extra” thing for us to do but a more efficient way of looking at things. The assessment tool should also help teachers learn and develop their teaching skills.

Dr. Benham gave examples of specific concepts our assessments should embody—ideas like effective grading policies that are relevant, comprehensive, consistent, fair, and clear to teacher, student, parent and administrator. He gave us a number of questions to think about in our own teaching and assessing to evaluate its effectiveness as well as to question our grading systems. Repertoire alone is not our curriculum or learner outcomes. We are to establish goals that are specific, measurable and achievable. Once the questions are in place then we are ready to move on as he did and discuss the general guidelines to design more effective evaluation tools.

It is important to divide the musical and non-musical goals and to clearly articu-

late these as different. The student is more likely to succeed more if both are brought into the equation. At the earlier stages of learning, the non-musical can be very effective in helping set the expectations for rehearsals and better learning later on, as is clear simple assessments that students can evaluate themselves. If we teach them some of our basic criteria and do it effectively we are more likely to see students be able to do what we expect all musicians to do: observe/listen/feel; modify; and adjust as necessary.

Assessment and grading are indeed two different things. Merely assigning grades should not be the goal. “Grades provide a singular feedback that cannot come close to demonstrating the complex and comprehensive nature of performing on a musical instrument.” Rather, assessing should enhance and improve instruction, and guide student learning.

Our assessment procedures need to be tied to our curriculum goals, and not metered out haphazardly during the year. An effective grading policy needs to be clear and understandable. Parents, students and the teacher are all points of a triangle that surrounds our assessment system. The evaluation system needs to be clear to all points of the triangle to be seen as valid. Janet Barrett (2006) has suggested these principles for grading and assessment policies:

- Clarity - all parties of the triangle plus

administrators should be aware of policies and expectations.

- Fairness - Policies should be consistent and fair and ability based.
- Emphasis on musical over extra musical factors - let’s not grade on attendance alone.
- Comprehensiveness - grading should reflect the complexity of the subject.
- Relationship of student work to evidence collected - can we support our grades?
- Ease of use - if it is burdensome, it is of no use.
- General tone and style - it should be positive and encouraging, not punitive.

With all those principles in place, it is time to design an evaluation tool. We looked at Rating Scales, Rubrics, Benchmarks, Performance Evolutions, and Scoring. The tool that was discussed in most depth was rubrics. Dr. Benham took us through many rubrics pointing out the flawed qualities as well as the good. The four terms Benham prefers when providing benchmarks are baseline, developing, proficient and advanced.

This article was compiled from All-State Teachers Workshop reports submitted by Janet Anderson (South Junior High, St. Cloud), Clare Chopp (Denfield High, Duluth) and Kathryn Liebenow (Brooklyn Park). ‡