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What Price Existence for Public School Music Education?

by Ginny Packer, President, Alaska ACDA

As a twenty-six-year music teaching veteran and student of music for the past 40-odd years, I would have to be completely blind, dumb, and deaf to not know that things today are “different.”

The changes in the bigger world that effect my music world are legion and yet, as I look at music programs around me and my own high school program, it often appears that we are trying to maintain what has been for 40 years.

I see many of us trying to come to grips with block scheduling, kids from broken homes, lack of belief in the importance of the arts by administrators and lack of community support for schools - period. Moreover, we deal daily with kids who have shortened attention spans, an ever-increasing need for instant gratification, a wider menu of activities from which to choose and an increasing image that students of music are “nerds.”

In a new study from the Education Commission of the States, fully 90% of high school students take no music.* At the other end of the grade spectrum, one of the first programs on the chopping block in districts under budgetary strains is often elementary music. At our teachers' in-service this fall, all of my district's teachers listened to a national speaker who believes that music should exist in the schools only as linkage with other disciplines, not as a discipline in and of itself. His belief is that elementary classroom teachers should instruct the music in their classroom and that the music specialists should not exist. Not surprisingly, my superintendent believes the very same.

And here I sit with a 26-year investment in music education. Do I feel undervalued? You bet. Do I feel frustration over the multitude of frontal attacks on that which I hold most dear? Of course.

And, along with many of you, I try to figure out what to do about it. Meanwhile, I also serve on my state MENC board, sit on committees to upgrade and update our All-State requirements, network with teachers from our northwest region, attend summer improvement workshops and dutifully continue to hone my craft, to ferret out and find the latest and best music available for my students. Sometimes it seems just too much to ask for me to figure out what I personally can do as change sweeps over me, my school, my students and the shaping of our musical life. I really just want to bury my

head in the music and carry on as if the dust storm of contemporary life and its concomitant changes will not reach me. Perhaps if I just shut the door to my room and just focus on what is under my immediate control...well, you and I both know that just as dust storms silt in under the windows and doors, so does the broader reach of change and the requirement that I must not keep my head in the music, but go out and do battle on the many fronts that confront me.

What can I personally do in this new paradigm?

As I struggle with what these larger issues mean and how they impact me, I find I need to figure out what part I can play and what decisions I can make, both inside and outside the classroom, that would both clarify and aid in fortifying the continuance of music education. What can I personally do to help shape the future of music instruction, to create out of the old traditional fabric that which would be accepted and valued by my students, their parents and my school staff? The following is what I feel I can do.

1. I need to set aside Wednesday after school to attend building management meetings. Yes, there are students I need to see after school, tapes I need to make for honor choirs, and music I need to pull from the files, but I also need to be at that weekly meeting. I need to keep abreast of the latest plans for overall scheduling of the school. While I am there, I need to keep in mind “win-win” possibilities for everyone’s program, and I need to convince my fellow teachers and administrators to do the same. I need to support other teachers’ programs and realize that I must consider the whole child, not just the musical portion of that child. I need to be proactive in my approach to how music is viewed in my school.
2. I need to continually advocate for the arts and set aside time in my schedule to set up activities that allow me to do so. I will write a music quarterly newsletter this year to parents, administration and students, so everyone knows who we are and what we are doing. I need to go before the school board sometime during the year to advocate. I need to work with my fellow music teachers in the district to plan such a presentation and plan how best to go about it. I need to keep in mind the statistic that 80% of American households have no school-aged children, that 25% of the voting electorate is over age 55 and increasingly unwilling to support a public education system they view as failing, and that 33% of U. S. households are single income wage earners with no children and little interest in paying for schools.* No wonder school support is eroding!

3. I need to keep abreast of the latest technology available and use it in my instruction. I need to set aside time to review new programs, music software and multimedia information. Using Band-in-A-Box, for example, is an excellent asset to use with a jazz ensemble. This is one way to link into the future and the new possibilities of music instruction.
4. I need to keep looking for and exploring possibilities for integration. Two years ago while teaching a symphonic band of 80, we played Frances MacBeth's *Of Sailors and Whales*, inviting all English teachers and their classes to a performance. The teachers were interested in this linkage. Since inter-disciplinary teaching will be one of the focal changes in the new evolving educational system, I plan to work with English teachers this year once again, more closely, using professional performances of "West Side Story" and a performance by the St. Petersburg Ice Ballet to study the theme of star-crossed lovers. My concert choir of 48, soprano choir of 44, and vocal jazz ensemble of 20 will attend these performances under a special program; the two concert groups will sing music linking this theme with these performances while my jazz ensemble will be taught choreography to fit "West Side Story." Most will be studying Shakespeare in their English classes at the same time. In this manner I can learn to be a resource person, not only a music specialist, and to be a teacher who can team with others.
5. My students need to feel at home in my music room, and my groups need to plan social events together, as well as rehearsals. My music room needs to be a place where students feel important and valued, and we need to do both written exercises and games that allow for us to get to know each other better. As the teacher, I need to foster an atmosphere in which everyone cares about everyone else. Music rehearsals must always keep this acceptance in mind and be interrupted to put these needs first when necessary. Last year each group selected a member of their music group to be a "Social Enhancer" as part of their Choral Council, to make sure we did things together both in and outside of class. It worked well, and I'll continue it.
6. I need to try to understand the pressures and possibilities that exist for today's student. I need to use music of interest to them to bridge to music that I find acceptable and musically of value. I can use, for example, Andrew Lloyd Webber's "Castle on a Cloud" for my entry level girls chorus to eventually have them accept Kodaly's "Hungarian Dancing Song." At the same time, I need to make available a choir for those students who have had training and are ready to sing challenging

and musically wonderful music. It is my job to figure out how to structure my music ensembles so they make sense of where students are in their musical lives. I do not need to accept those students who are looking for “a slacker class” as part of the same choir with students who enjoy challenging music from different countries and different periods of time.

7. I need to explore the possibility of including non-traditional music classes like a steel drum band. As I did buy a set of steel drums with a community member last year, I will use them as a means to involve students who are aural in their approach to music or perhaps do not include music making in their life at all. Likewise, if I did teach guitar, I would need to figure out how to teach kids who approach guitar aurally and perhaps read Tab instead of traditional music notation. As music teachers we need to reach out into that 90% of the student body that takes no music, rather than recycling only that 10% into all the music classes available.
8. In order to hang on to students in music classes, I need to figure out how to structure the daily rehearsals with the right balance of assessment, sequential learning and practicing the skill of singing or playing. With the rightful call for all of us to align our curriculum with the National Standards, we need to teach as if we are a tightrope act, getting just right the ingredients of learning about music and making music. Students already overloaded with academic requirements will not want to select our traditional classes of choir and band in their schedules unless we stand firm about music being “a different way of knowing.” How does a music teacher require practice, run a rigorous music program and yet have students select music as their elective? How can a middle school music teacher answer questions about why all students but band students get to go through the exploration loop, while as instrumental music students, they must, year after year, continue with the “old idea” of playing their instrument? As I set up my program this fall, I need to work on this delicate balance daily. On the other hand, I need to have administration and parents see that music deserves a place in the core curriculum by having a purposeful and meaningful curriculum.

Well, there you have it. As I look over my “makin’ a list and checkin’ it twice,” I must admit I am tired. Besides all the teaching, all the performances, all the time spent with kids before and after school, I must continually make efforts to justify and convince everyone that what I do has value, just to keep music a possibility in young lives. No, that is not exactly

the truth. I know that what I do has value. Many of my students know it has value. I know that the music I have been part of has given life meaning, has lent its joy, has offered intellectual challenge and has united strangers in its gift of group expression of laughter and sadness and, ultimately, of the connectedness of the human spirit. To defend what I do, I will never be too tired!

**References: Kimpton, Jeffrey, "The Value of Music: Whose Values? What Music?," Voice (Washington Music Educators Association), May 1998, pp. 26-27*