



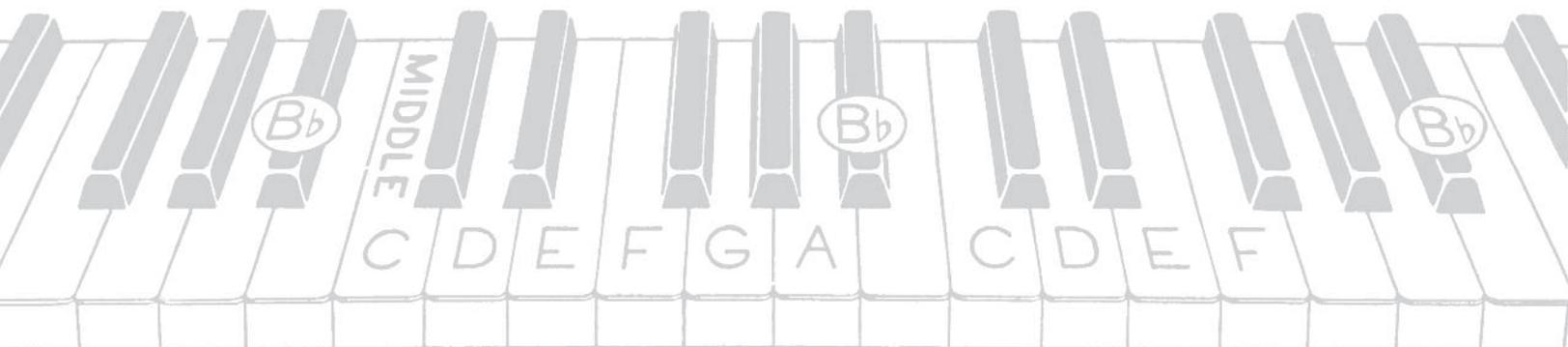
Making Ourselves Indispensable

Community Building as a Strategy for Insuring Success in the Elementary School General Music Program

by Richard Lawton
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When I attended my first CASMEC this past February, I wasn't sure what to expect. I had always heard that CMEA was a band directors association, and, as a general music elementary school teacher, I wondered how much of the conference would apply to me. It was wonderful to discover that CMEA is, in fact, a broad-based music education organization, with a clear goal of reaching out to all types of music programs in every grade level from kindergarten to college. As for the general music workshops, organized by retiring CMEA General Music Representative Jean Strickland, they were great – useful, well-attended and, most importantly, fun.

During one of several excellent speeches I heard over my three days in Fresno, CMEA President Russ Sperling spoke of the importance of music programs being more visible in our communities. This notion of community outreach as a way of keeping music education relevant resonated again a few days later when the Pasadena-based public radio station KPCC reported on a proposed Los Angeles Unified School District plan to cut the existing instrumental music program at my school and others in half so that the number of schools receiving music could be doubled.¹ Although the presumed goal of reaching more children may be well intended, it speaks to a lack of understanding of what music teachers do and what they need at a bare minimum to be successful.



For those of us who teach it, the notion that music is an essential part of the curriculum is a given. What might come as a surprise is that our non-music teaching colleagues, parents, and fellow citizens overwhelmingly agree. In a 2003 Gallup Poll 95% of those surveyed felt that music was an important part of a child's education. And of those, 75% felt it ought to be the law (which, as was mentioned several times during the conference, it is in California).² In the years since the 2003 poll music programs across the state, particularly in public schools, have been in sharp decline. Nevertheless, there is comfort to be taken from these numbers, for they suggest that our communities want to support music education and may support it, even in an era where only essential programs survive, if we can persuade them that music education is something their children can absolutely not do without.

School communities are never just one group, but are a series of interconnected ones, the innermost and most important of which is the community of our students and their families. Some of us barely get to know our kids teaching in five different schools a week, while others are considered rock stars in our stand-alone programs. In both scenarios, and every variation in between, there are plenty of things we can do to upgrade the experience our kids are having. Are we choosing material that is relatable? Are we reflecting on our teaching practice to ensure that we are giving our students the best chance to be successful? Are we creating enough opportunities for students to compose their own material and giving them some opportunities to showcase it? Despite the ongoing discussion about national standards and teacher evaluation, the measure of success for most music teachers still comes down to how enthusiastic their students are.

A classroom colleague of mine, who has been with the Los Angeles Unified School District for 25 years, still takes advantage of every professional development opportunity that comes along, still works long hours refining her lesson plans and evaluating her effectiveness. She does this, she says, because she views her students and their parents as her clientele. This viewpoint will resonate with teachers in private schools, but it is

an increasingly healthy perspective for teachers in public schools, as well. Tenure doesn't mean much if your position or department is eliminated entirely.

Just beyond the classroom is a larger community made up of administrators, other teachers and parent fundraisers. Studies show that, while they are likely to be supporters of our music programs, they may have different ideas about what the priorities ought to be – for example, placing a higher priority on “music appreciation” as a goal over “student composition.”³ Although we may disagree, we need to be respectful of these views and incorporate them where possible. As for our classroom colleagues, they are involved in a complex effort to reform education through Common Core. We can be helpful to them by using music to create problem-solving opportunities in language arts and math. Some may argue that the proper role of music teachers is to teach music, but, as we all know, music is an excellent vehicle for teaching every other subject. A few moments spent reinforcing core concepts from other curricula can only enhance musical understanding and, as a practical matter, are likely to engender appreciation and support even from arts education skeptics.

Most of our schools are part of larger district communities that fund our programs. Often the search for one-size-fits-all solutions waters down the very things that are special about our programs, while at the same time increasing the perceived cost, making us more vulnerable to cuts. There are limits to what an individual teacher can do to influence district policy (and sometimes it is best to keep your head down) but this much is clear – programs that are thought to be extraordinary are harder to cut. What are we doing to make our programs stand out? Festivals and competitions may be more oriented towards upper grade instrumental and choral music, but there are plenty of opportunities – hospitals, rest homes, neighboring schools – to take our general music show on the road. Our kids will have a chance to showcase their skills, do some good, and remind everyone that music, as Plato said, gives a soul to the universe, wings to the mind, flight to the imagination and life to everything. Again, we all agree that this is true, but there's nothing like children caroling one

sunny morning at the farmer's market to remind everyone how true.

The final community we need to reach out to more is our own. Most music teachers I know operate to a large extent in isolation. It's important to check in with our peers, not just to get caught up on the latest developments, in the profession and in the effort to support it, but to remind ourselves that we are not alone. Moreover, when that checking in takes place, as it often does, at a workshop, it is accompanied by an opportunity to engage in music learning along side our peers, something we encourage our students to do every day but don't experience ourselves often enough.

Which brings us back to CMEA and the CASMEC conference. If you didn't go this year, consider it for 2015. At the very least you are likely to come away from the experience with a sense of renewed optimism. And for all the reasons given here, each of us can and should do a little bit more to advance our common cause. Music education is not a hard sell, but selling has to be part of the process. That sensibility may seem more rooted in show business than education, but that's okay...we are music teachers, after all.

1 Plummer, M. (2014, February 21). “LA School Arts Budget: Most funds will go to Arts Integration Teachers.”

89.3 KPCC Southern California Public Radio.

Transcript available at www.scpr.org/blogs/education/2014/02/21/15899/la-unified-arts-budget-most-funds-will-go-to-arts/

2 Abril, C. & Gault, B. (Spring, 2006) “The State of Music in the Elementary School: a Principal's Perspective.”

Journal of Research in Music Education, 54 (1), 6-20. <http://jrm.sagepub.com/content/54/1/6>

3 Major, M. (Spring, 2013) “How They Decide: A Case Study Examining the Decision-Making Process for Keeping or Cutting Music in a K-12

Public School District.” *Journal of Research in Music Education*. 61(1) 5-25. <http://jrm.sagepub.com/content/61/1/5>