



EDITORIAL

A NEVER-ENDING CRISIS

"With the increased emphasis on math and science, music is in danger of being crowded out of the schools."

Joe Grolimund, president of The Selmer Company, discussing music education in the aftermath of the Soviet launch of the Sputnik satellite, 1960.

"There is an unprecedented crisis facing school music programs across the country."

Leslie B. Propp, president, The American Music Conference 1978

"Music education faces a dire crisis."

Karl Bruhn, NAMM director of market development 1990

"When children are being deprived of music education, we are facing a crisis."

Michael Greene, president of NARAS, in a televised speech at the Grammy awards, 1999.

"Shifting priorities and budget cuts are placing these [music programs] in more danger than ever before." From an American Music Conference press release in 2003.

In the years since I began writing this column, the music products industry has been transformed by so many dramatic changes that space precludes even a partial listing here. However, there has been one absolute constant throughout the years: School music programs are always in a state of crisis. With the predictability of the seasons, each year well meaning members of various educator and industry associations earnestly explain that due to a lethal combination of budgetary pressures, administrative indifference, scheduling problems, and local apathy, school music programs from coast to coast are facing the immediate threat of extinction. And yet each year the dire predictions never seem to materialize.

For nearly half a century our columns have regularly carried these warnings of imminent doom. Unintentionally, the primary achievement of this long-running commentary has been to illustrate just how little anyone knows about the national state of music education. There is no shortage of inspiring anecdotes about mobilized parents beating back a school board decision to axe music. Hollywood even addressed the subject with the moving *Mr. Holland's Opus*. But when it comes to knowing how many of the nation's 50,000 independent school districts offer instrumental music, how many

school music educators are currently employed, how many of the 53 million K-12 students participate in music programs, or most importantly, which way is the trend line moving, we are all clueless.

Is the number of kids in music programs increasing or decreasing? No one has a clear answer. Here's what we do know: Over the past 30 years combined unit sales of wind and string instruments have been equal to between 1.3% and 1.4% of total school enrollment, suggesting that music programs have more resilience than their advocates realize. The stability of instrument sales helps explain why school retailers and manufacturers manage to avoid sheer panic with these regular predictions of doom.

Against this backdrop, it is refreshing to read a new study commissioned by the American String Teachers Association and the National School Orchestra Association. Dispensing with the shopworn crisis rhetoric, the two groups commissioned national surveys of school districts and educators to truly understand the status of school music. Their findings were surprising. On the positive side, they found that between 1980 and the present the number of students playing stringed instruments increased steadily at elementary, middle school, and high school levels. 66% of teachers reported an increase in the number of stringed instrument students between 1995 and 2000. On the negative side, 22% of string teachers plan to retire between 2000-2005, 24% of school districts had openings for string teachers that were unfilled, and that 57% of string teachers predicted that there would be teacher openings available in their schools between 2002 and 2004. Armed with the understanding that there is no lack of parental or administrative support for music, ASTA is tackling the problem of creating more teachers to apply for these unfilled positions.

As other groups rightly concerned about ensuring the place of music education prepare to issue another call to the barricades, we would suggest they take a close look at the ASTA and NSOA String project to create more teachers at www.astaweb.com. A thoughtful study of music education with more emphasis on participation levels and trend lines and less in the way of colorful anecdotes might be the first step in some strategies that could make a meaningful difference in the field.

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