

# Time For New Tactics In Promoting School Music?

**F**or as long as we can remember, educator associations and a host of other well meaning people have been warning of a grave budget crisis in education that threatens the future existence of school music programs. We have no doubt that among the 17,500 school districts in the U.S., there are those that are scaling back or eliminating their music programs due to straitened finances. However, a cursory review of the facts suggests that the state of music in the schools is a good deal more complex than the popular caricature of selfish taxpayers, skinflint administrators, and cash-starved schools dumping music programs to make ends meet.

Let's start with educational funding levels. It's hard to make the case that our public schools are facing anything resembling a financial crisis. Based on data compiled by the National Education Association, the largest teacher union, in the 2003-2004 school year, national spending per student for grades K-12 was 3.6% higher than in the previous year. That's 1.4% higher than the prevailing inflation rate. Over the past decade the NEA also documents that per-student expenditures have increased at an average annual rate of 4.4%. What's more, there hasn't been a single year between 1995 and 2004 when per-student spending levels didn't advance faster than the rate of inflation.

It's also worth pointing out that there is no direct correlation between spending per student and the presence of good music education programs. Anecdotal evidence, not to mention data on instrument shipments, suggests that Texas enjoys some of the strongest school music programs in the nation. Yet when it comes to spending, at \$7,305 per student, the Lone Star State ranks only number 32 and is well below the the national average of \$8,208. Contrast that with the District of Columbia, where per-student spending is the highest in the nation at \$13,317 and there is little or no music in the schools. Why is it that music programs in Ohio seem to be thriving, where per-student spending levels average \$9,136, but are in dire straits in New Jersey, where spending levels are at \$12,390? We could cite similar anomalies, but suffice it to say that bigger



school budgets are no guarantee of a better music programs.

We cite the data above not because we have anything against advocating for school music, but rather because we think the prevailing approach is seriously in need of fine-tuning. After 30 years of clamoring for more money, perhaps it's time to start asking why music education isn't getting its share of the largesse flowing into our public schools. Is it because of the costs

of complying with State and Federal mandates? Is the tendency to ask teachers to address every conceivable social ill—eating disorders, self-esteem, bullying, etc.—consuming time and resources that could be directed towards music? Are union contracts and bureaucracy the culprits? We don't profess to have concrete answers to any of these questions, but we think that some investigation might yield insights that could help us become more effective advocates for the cause.

The effort to identify "best practices" within an industry has led to huge productivity gains in every facet of retailing and manufacturing. Perhaps a similar approach to education could help explain why Texas can deliver above-average music programs with below-average spending and provide a road map for other regions to follow.

If music education is still in a crisis mode, some new tactics are in order. We raise the questions above as a way to jump start the conversation on how best to achieve the worthy and broadly shared goal of more music in the schools.

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