

Music Education Or Botox... Make A Choice!

What provides a greater social good, music education or unlimited Botox treatments and liposuction? Given the debate currently underway at the Buffalo, New York school system, this question isn't as silly as it might seem, and it also has some serious implications for how best to advocate for school music programs nationwide.

Here's the back-story. Buffalo is a metropolis that has seen better times. Citizens have fled the Empire State's second largest city, causing a 22% population decline over the past two decades, and the median income level is only a tad higher than Detroit's. With a current population of 261,000, Buffalo actually has fewer residents than it did in 1900. The exodus has resulted in a declining economy, high unemployment, and sagging school enrollments. Against this doleful backdrop, the city recently announced that it would eliminate all music programs in the coming year to trim about \$2.2 million from its budget. Yet, while music programs are coming under the budgetary scalpel, the *Buffalo News* reported that a plastic surgery benefit in the teachers' employment contract has been left untouched. Giving Buffalo's 3,200 teachers unlimited access to dermabrasions, breast augmentations, and any other cosmetic procedure, with no co-payment, costs the district about \$5.4 million a year.

The benefit has been a bonanza for plastic surgeons. Local physicians interviewed by the *Buffalo News* said that teachers represented four out of ten of their patients. Not surprisingly, they also asserted that unlimited plastic surgery was a well-deserved perk. Dr. Kulwant Bhangoo, a plastic surgeon in Buffalo for almost four decades, told a local CBS affiliate, "I feel the teachers have paid their dues and it would be wrong to take it away from them." Dr. Bhangoo and several of his colleagues regularly advertise their services in publications aimed at Buffalo educators. Left unsaid is that these funds could be spent on other, perhaps more worthwhile activities, including offering Buffalo's 42,000 students exposure to music making.

The template for most music advocacy efforts has been a straightforward call for more money, as if additional funding will solve all problems. However, the situation in Buffalo forcefully illustrates, *how* money is spent is every bit as important as *how much* is spent. Which brings us to the issue of how best to craft a persuasive argument for school music programs.

Buffalo residents are among the highest taxed in the nation, paying lofty income, sales, and property tax levies. The school district's \$14,800 per-student expenditures are also about 28% higher than the national average. Unfortunately, it doesn't appear that residents are getting much bang for their buck. Local civic and news websites are filled with anecdotes of feather-bedding municipal labor practices, funds squandered

on poorly thought out capital projects, and rampant cronyism. This well-documented mismanagement makes it doubtful that a plea to increase school funding would gain much traction with voters. Yet these same voters are highly receptive to arguments for the better allocation of existing funds. The plastic surgery/music program trade-off has sparked a torrent of commentary from the citizenry. And with the exception of a few plastic surgeons and school teachers, opinion seems unanimous in favor of keeping music and ditching plastic surgery.



Union officials, obviously embarrassed by the situation, are back-pedaling in the face of public ridicule, and administrators have seized the high ground. As of this writing, Buffalo's Mayor, Byron Brown has managed to come up with \$400,000 to partially restore music programs.

Whether music programs regain full funding is still under debate. Union officials say that they will scale back the plastic surgery benefit if the administrators come back to the bargaining table and renegotiate a contract. School administrators counter that the union isn't prepared to bargain in good faith because a failure to reach a new agreement leaves the current contract, with its guaranteed annual wage increases, in place. Hopefully, continued public pressure, along with a dose of ridicule, will break the stalemate.

Regardless of the outcome, the Buffalo case suggests that highlighting how existing funds might better be directed towards music programs is a more effective way to motivate the citizenry than a simple call for "more money." Not every school district offers such a clear-cut choice between music and plastic surgery, but anyone who took the time to scan publicly available budgeted documents would most likely uncover some misplaced fiscal priorities. The New York City schools, for example, spend close to \$100 million a year on "rubber rooms," holding pens where demonstrably incompetent teachers sit idly all day and collect their salaries because union contracts make it too costly to fire them. In our fair state of New Jersey, stories about graft in school procurement policies regularly make the headlines. Who wouldn't rather see this money directed towards music?

Management in a world of finite resources involves making choices, some of which are difficult. Music advocates would better advance the cause by highlighting the misplaced priorities that limit access to music education rather than issuing a blanket plea for more money.

Brian T. Majeski

Editor

brian@musictrades.com