

Scaring Talent Away From School Music Programs?

The quality of the educator is the single most important variable for determining the success of a school music program. It trumps the economy, demographics, and budget constraints. Anyone who's spent time in a school will tell you that there's a direct correlation between the ability of the music educator, the level of student participation, and the music program's staying power. A good music director equals a strong and healthy music program. Conversely, vulnerable programs can usually be traced to a lackluster director. This is a simple truth that everyone in the school music business—retailers, instrument makers, and publishers—would agree with. Yet, are efforts to rally financial and political support for music programs, inadvertently driving away the kind of talented people necessary to create thriving music programs?

For as long as we can remember, school music advocates have constantly used words like "crisis," "budget cuts," and "imminent elimination" to describe music programs in American public schools. This language has also been adopted by the general media. Do a Lexis/Nexis search of the words "school music program" and you'll turn up an endless stream of articles that mention decimated programs and a bleak future for music as accepted wisdom, without a shred of supporting evidence. We appreciate why journalists gravitate towards bad news: A story headlined "Epic Air Disaster Shocks Nation" gets more readership than "15,000 Airliners Landed Safely Yesterday." Yet the absence of any positive school music news coverage is astounding. Is this drum beat of bad news discouraging bright college students from pursuing a career in music education? We have no data on the subject, but it seems plausible that stories about slashed budgets and perpetually declining support could prompt a reasonable person to conclude that even typewriter repairmen have a better futures than music teachers.

Aside from possibly discouraging future music teachers, the grim picture of school music is arguably untrue. As we report elsewhere in this issue, school music dealers from across the country recently convened in New Orleans for their annual convention, a veritable celebration of the vibrancy of school music programs. Turnout at the event hit a new record and the mood was enthusiastic: no sign of panic anywhere. Featured speaker Dr. Tim Lautzenheiser, a noted educational consultant, offered up evidence to support the rosy outlook. "While everyone is running around saying music programs are disappearing, that really is not the case," he said, adding that, of the approximately 56,000 programs currently operating in the U.S., the attrition rate

over the past three years was well under 1%. Elsewhere, Guitar Center's recent financials delivered additional good news. The company's Music & Arts division, which serves school music programs almost exclusively, was the star performer last year, posting a 9.8% year-over-year sales gain. Revenues at the Guitar Center stores edged up just 0.5%, and the internet division saw revenues decline.

Several factors have led to this happy state of affairs. First and foremost is the symbiotic relationship that exists between instrument makers, specialized school music retailers, and school music programs. Over a 50-year period, retailers and instrument makers have developed the



financial expertise necessary to manage instrument rental programs. Augmented by student recruitment efforts and repair capabilities, these services have made possible school music as we know it today. All this is old news, which makes it easy to take for granted. But, a review of music markets around the world reveals that it's a system that

is unique to the United States. We profile retailers from around the world in this issue, and nearly all of them view the U.S. school music system with a combination of awe and envy.

NAMM also deserves a share of credit for its decades of work tirelessly preaching the benefits of making music. NAMM funded research has provided credible evidence that mastering an instrument enhances cognitive skills, builds discipline, and even fosters mental well-being. The resulting publicity has confirmed the value of school music programs and fostered public support.

So here's a modest suggestion. Set aside the disaster scenarios for a moment and talk about the poetry of music programs, how they enrich the lives of children, fill parents with pride, and enhance local communities. And, don't forget to mention that being a school music director can be a wonderfully satisfying career, offering compelling non-monetary rewards. There are also some decent careers to be had serving the school market as a retailer or manufacturer. Perhaps if advocates turned their attention to the remarkable durability of school music programs, the industry could better attract the kind of talent needed to make them even stronger.

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