

Are We Really Facing A Crisis?

The dictionary defines crisis as instability or danger leading to a decisive change, usually for the worse. For at least the past 15 years numerous well meaning individuals, educators, associations, and industry members have selected the term "crisis" to describe the condition of school music programs in the U.S. Abraham Lincoln, who was noted for his mastery of language, once quipped, "The difference between the right word and the wrong word is the difference between lightning and lightning bug." From our vantage point, the problems facing school music are as close to a "crisis" as lightning is to a lightning bug.

"Crisis" implies an imminent and large-scale disaster, yet when it comes to music in the public schools, there is little tangible evidence of any pending catastrophe. It should also be emphasized that there is little tangible evidence, period. Basic questions—like How many public school music teachers are there? How many schools offer music education? How many students are involved in music programs nationwide? or most importantly, Are the trends up or down?—remain unanswered. How, then, can we talk about a "crisis" if we have can't begin to quantify, with even a modicum of precision, the changes that have taken place in school music programs over the past decade?

Proponents of the "crisis" theory can point to individual school systems where budget problems led to cutbacks in music. Isolated problems, however heart-wrenching, do not necessarily constitute a national "crisis." When, for example, General Motors closed a plant in Willowdale, Michigan, the local economy was devastated, and in all likelihood, music and sound sales suffered, Yet it would be foolish to elevate this single event to the status of a national crisis.

Offsetting the stories of school music's decline in individual districts, a sizable body of data indicates that programs are alive and well across the nation. In a recent poll conducted by *The Instrumentalist* magazine, school music directors reported that, on average, their 1991 budgets were 8% higher than last year. Hardly a sign of imminent collapse.

Just because "crisis" is an inappropriate term does not mean that school music programs are without problems. Most state and local governments across the country are having a hard time balancing their budgets, and cutting music programs is sometimes seen as a solution. It goes without saying that deal-

ers have to be sensitive to these problems and willing to marshal local support when the need arises.

Yet the continual use of the word "crisis" reminds us of Aesop's fable about the boy who cried wolf. For over 15 years the pages of *Music Trades* have regularly carried guest editorials by concerned industry members predicting an imminent collapse in the school music business. But after 15 years of reading grim predictions and then writing good business with school programs, we suspect that a lot of dealers have stopped taking the predictions seriously.

Investing in inventory and going out into the schools and communities to talk up music education is unquestionably one of the best ways dealers can help foster school music programs. No one disputes this. Yet constantly describing the business as "in a state of crisis" tends to discourage this activity. What intelligent businessman would invest time, energy, and dollars to promote a business that is about to expire?

School music is a wonderful experience that unquestionably contributes to the development of millions of children each year. Survey after survey confirms that many parents recognize the value of school music programs and are willing to support them with their votes and dollars. It is also worth noting that America's school music programs remain the envy of the world; sales of band and orchestral instruments on a per capita basis in the U.S. far outstrip any other nation. Nothing indicates that any of the above is about to change dramatically this year or the next or the next. Hence, "crisis" is a poorly chosen word.

NAMM's efforts to promote music through its coalition with the Music Educators National Conference and the National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences are praiseworthy. The coalition deserves credit for enumerating the benefits of music education in a variety of public forums and forcing politicians to acknowledge, in writing, the value of music; however, let's get on with the business of promoting music and stop talking about a national crisis. We are not serving the cause by scaring off business people who might otherwise be willing to invest in promoting one of the industry's most cherished institutions.

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