

Will National Standards Help?

President Clinton's pending National Educational Standards legislation has generated considerable enthusiasm within the music industry because it makes reference to music as a vital part of the school curriculum. Obviously, we are strongly in favor of any legislation that acknowledges the academic value of music or furthers the cause of our industry. However, we have serious doubts about the benefits of National Educational Standards, even if they do make mention of music.

There is an initial burst of enthusiasm whenever a specific industry, or local or state government, secures Federal assistance. Over time, though, getting aid from the Feds is often akin to making a pact with the Devil; the support comes with a heavy price. Chicago's Mayor, Richard Daley received a resounding chorus of approval from local and state officials of all political stripe when he pointed this out. "Unfunded Federal Mandates and burdensome regulations have had a disastrous affect on Chicago's ability to meet its residents' basic needs and other priority needs, while controlling the costs of local government," he recently declared. Specifically, Daley was referring to the costly and counterproductive results of Federal efforts to "improve" health care, welfare, transportation, and the environment. If Clinton's bill passes, he will be able to add education to the list because the Educational Standards Bill is essentially another "unfunded federal mandate." In other words, it is a bill that dilutes local managerial prerogative by prodding local school systems to spend their money in certain ways without providing any funds.

When you look at why school music programs have come under increasing budgetary pressure in recent years, it's not because actual spending-per-pupil has decreased. (It has actually increased at a faster rate than general inflation.) It's because the cost of complying with an increasing number of mandates originating from state capitals has consumed an increasing share of the funds available. When schools are forced by law to spend more for things like handicap access, social workers, English as a second language instruction, self esteem training, and various forms of sex awareness, there is less available for music programs. We are not inherently against any of the programs listed above; however, we think that local parents and schools should be free to allocate funds as they see fit. Their judgment and desire to enrich their own children makes them far more likely to

make the right call in properly allocating finite funds than some distant bureaucrat or elected official.

If Clinton's Education Bill becomes law, and local schools shell out more funds to comply with the proposed "standards," the industry should ask, "Will there be more money left over for hiring music teachers or equipping music rooms?" We think not. Given that the standards are hundreds of pages long and need to be prioritized, we doubt that music will end up anywhere near the top of the list, especially in light of the recent Department of Education study which indicates that 50% of the adult U.S. population was functionally illiterate. So, when the inevitable money crunch arises, music could be worse off than it was in a pre-standard environment.

If there are going to be National Educational standards, the industry is probably better off with music on rather than off the list. However, we can't find much to get enthusiastic about whole process.

The Perils Of Predictions

Ten years ago, a lot of smart people in the industry were predicting that the acoustic guitar was rapidly following the accordion into oblivion and that American guitar makers were the commercial equivalent of dinosaurs when the first snow began to fall, i.e. not long for this world. What a difference a decade makes. Fretted products remain one of the most vibrant categories within the industry, and American guitar makers are riding high throughout the world.

Were industry pundits dumb ten years ago? Not really, they were just shown up by the unpredictability of events. Trying to guess what will be the hottest product five years from now is a lot like trying to guess what the weather will be. Past performance provides some helpful guidance, but there is always the chance that a freak hail-storm in July could tank the most carefully reasoned prediction. And forecasters find out that freak events occur with remarkable regularity.

In the 103 years since the first issue of *Music Trades* was published, the one thing we have come to count on is that every ten years or so, some widely accepted prediction will prove remarkably wrong. Space precludes listing them all here, but in the meantime, keep your eyes open and avoid becoming blinded by some plausible sounding forecast.

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