

## Strengthening Music Programs While Avoiding Advocacy Pitfalls

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This article examines ways in which music education advocacy efforts have become disconnected from the unified visions and declarations of music educators espoused in the Tanglewood and Housewright declarations and are thus reifying the disconnect between what we value and what we say we value. We first analyze the policies posited by the recently formed Music Education Policy Roundtable and consider several counterarguments. Second, we suggest new directions in music education advocacy by discussing ways to make our programs more culturally relevant and valuable to our schools and communities. Finally, we conclude with a call for our professional organization to take a leadership role in situating the arts as an important element of American public school education by reigniting national aims discussions that lead to liberal and humanistic education policies.

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There is a positive relation between the efforts we have to expend on advocacy and the level of irrelevancy of what we offer. (Reimer 2005, 141)

Recently, there has been much written within the arts education community regarding advocacy efforts (Bowman 2005; Branscome 2012; Elpus 2007; Hope 2010; Jones 2009; Kos 2010; Miksza 2013; Peterson 2011; Remer 2010; Risner 2010; West 2012). These discussions often intensify when administrators and school boards are forced to make difficult decisions about how to best allocate diminishing education dollars. Combined with curricula that are increasingly focused on subjects for which schools are held accountable, one wonders how the arts are surviving in schools at all (West 2012). Their survival can be attributed in part to our field's many advocacy efforts—we as a profession have become skilled at both articulating our message and delivering it to as many people as will listen—but has our message become disassociated from our values?

If we consider that philosophy (as used in this context) is a set of beliefs that guides behavior, and advocacy is the act or process of supporting a cause, then it stands that our efforts to support music education should be driven by our beliefs about its value. However, what we *believe* is valuable and what we *say* is valuable are sometimes different; that is, our advocacy arguments are not always aligned with our philosophical beliefs. To illustrate this point, we can look at several instances in history, such as the Tanglewood and Housewright symposia, where music educators have collectively agreed on certain values. Music educators at Tanglewood declared music's value to lie in the art of living, the building of personal identity, and the nurturing of creativity (Choate 1968). Three decades later in Tallahassee, music education leaders affirmed their beliefs that music exalts the human spirit, enhances the quality of life, and is worth studying because it is one of the primary ways human beings create and share meanings (Madsen 2000). Nowhere in either the Tanglewood Declaration or the Housewright Declaration is it suggested that the value of music lies in the utilitarian purposes often purported by music education advocacy organizations.

We, the authors, believe that many modern advocacy efforts have become disconnected from the unified visions

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and declarations of music educators espoused in the Tanglewood and Housewright declarations, and may thus be reifying the disconnect between what we value and what we say we value. We agree with Bowman (2005) that advocacy should not dictate philosophy. In fact, we suggest that to preserve intellectual honesty, our advocacy arguments must be derived from our philosophical beliefs, even if those beliefs are not perceived as the most expedient ways of preserving our programs.

This article first analyzes the policy posited by the recently formed Music Education Policy Roundtable (MEPR) and considers several counterarguments. MEPR is a coalition consisting of groups such as the National Association for Music Education (NAfME), the National Association of Music Merchants (NAMM), the VH1 Save the Music Foundation, the American Choral Directors Association (ACDA), the American Orff-Schulwerk Association, the American String Teachers Association (ASTA), and many others. It describes its mission as the “unification of all music education advocacy organizations under a single policy apparatus, working in unison to achieve a consensus set of federal legislative recommendations, on behalf of the profession and all of those who stand to benefit from its contributions to education” (National Association for Music Education [NAfME] 2013). Second, we suggest new directions in music education advocacy by discussing ways to make our programs more socially relevant and valuable to our schools and communities. Finally, we conclude with a call for our professional organization to take the lead in situating the arts as an important element of American public school education by reigniting national aims discussions that lead to liberal and humanistic education policies.

### UNFOUNDED ADVOCACY POSITIONS

Times change; people change; values, cultural norms, and ideas about education change. Many once-compelling arguments become increasingly irrelevant as society’s values evolve. For example, advocates for the first American public school music programs argued that singing helps exercise the lungs (Mark and Gary 2007). Imagine if the same position were put forth today. Do we have conclusive evidence that singing exercises the lungs? If so, would physical education classes not exercise the lungs better than singing? Is the possible benefit of exercising the lungs important enough to include singing in an underfunded school system that is simply trying to survive the next round of test scores? Though valued at the time, such a position would almost certainly be dismissed today as both unfounded and trivial. But consider for a moment whether music educators, without even realizing it, are today advocating positions that are unfounded and trivial.

On NAfME’s advocacy webpage, the Music Education Policy Roundtable lists the benefits of a high-quality

classroom music experience. First on their list is the following claim: “The intellectual and technical skills developed through music education lead to more comprehensive brain development, which contributes to academic achievement in other areas, such as math and reading” (NAfME 2013). In addition to placing music in a subservient position to other subjects, this argument also represents what might be considered our twenty-first-century version of “lung exercise.” Since at least the early 1990s, some music education advocates have attempted to establish links between music instruction and some peripheral measure of increased cognitive performance. Even people outside of the profession have come to believe that studying music can lead to higher test scores and overall intelligence. However, this literature is often misrepresented when music education advocates confuse causation with correlation (Winner and Hetland 2000). For instance, does music instruction improve test scores, or do students with high test scores choose to be in music? Does music make you smarter, or does any disciplined study make you smarter? One must wonder: If a study were to compare test scores of music students to test scores of chess club students, would the results look similar? Furthermore, would advocates then conclude that chess makes you smarter? While we do not dismiss the importance of correlational research, music education advocates, including the MEPR, must be careful not to make claims based on research that music instruction, by itself, “contributes to” or may “lead to” academic achievement.

Similar to the unfounded claim that singing exercises the lungs, much of the research purporting that music makes you smarter has been discredited, misrepresented, or declared inconclusive. In fact, Elpus (2013) found that high school music students did not outperform their nonmusic counterparts on college entrance exams or on standardized math tests when controlling for a series of covariates related to selection into music. But imagine for a moment that researchers one day find that skills learned in music do indeed cause improved academic performance; Bennett Reimer (1999) asks us to consider in this instance whether we really want to argue that music is valuable because it can help students perform better in “real” subjects. Is that why we do what we do? Relying on such an argument puts us in the precarious position of hoping that researchers will not one day find another, less expensive, and less time-consuming activity that could accomplish the same end.

### ADVOCACY POSITIONS NOT UNIQUE TO MUSIC

Second on MEPR’s list of benefits of a high-quality classroom music experience is “enhanced teamwork prowess, discipline, and problem solving skills, all of which aid in molding better employees and citizens” (NAfME 2013). Let us suppose for a moment that music does in fact

enhance these skills. In this instance, we would certainly have to acknowledge that subjects that are less expensive and less time consuming than music could also develop these characteristics. These are characteristics of good teaching, not traits inherent to any particular subject. Arguing that music study is important because it fosters teamwork, discipline, and problem-solving skills is analogous to claiming that singing exercises the lungs—even if it is true, it is not unique to singing, and it is certainly not *why* humans sing.

### EXAGGERATED ADVOCACY POSITIONS

Next, the MEPR suggests that a high-quality classroom music experience hones “self expression and creativity, which not only helps keep students in school but also motivates them to work harder in other classes and assists them with becoming more actively involved in the community as adults” (NAfME 2013). While there are those among us who are experts at cultivating students’ creativity through improvisation, composition, arranging, and having students make creative decisions about how to perform music, the fact is that many large ensemble experiences involve students *re-creating* rather than creating music (Sheridan-Rabideau 2010), and thus we might have to admit that this claim is a bit exaggerated.

Last, the MEPR suggests that a high-quality classroom music experience provides “a profoundly positive influence on students in disadvantaged communities” and “performance opportunities that encourage and nurture lifelong connections and an appreciation for the arts” (NAfME 2013). While we hope this is the case, the authors do not find any empirical evidence that supports these claims. Claiming that classroom music experiences positively influence students in disadvantaged communities without citing supporting research leaves music education advocates vulnerable to savvy opponents who could argue that students in disadvantaged communities are often not attracted to the kinds of music that we offer in school (Elpus and Abril 2011). Furthermore, when we consider that 57 percent of students receive school music instruction (National Center for Education Statistics 2008), yet only 10 percent of adults report continuing to sing or play a band or orchestra instrument (National Endowment for the Arts 2008), we must challenge the notion that school music develops “lifelong connections and an appreciation for the arts.”

### NEW DIRECTIONS FOR MUSIC EDUCATION ADVOCACY

As music educators, we are in the difficult position of trying to articulate to various stakeholders the inherent value of a

music education. We value music because we have *experienced* its value, but those experiences are difficult for us to label—how does one describe the essence of music without sounding grandiose? Similarly, how do we argue for the value of music education without overstating our case? It is tempting to rally behind any claim that we believe would convince an administrator to spare our program, but in so doing we may be unwittingly promoting contemporary versions of “lung exercise.”

Perhaps it is time to shift our efforts away from selling our product and toward strengthening it—that is, bolstering our programs through action rather than advocacy. A product that is valued by others needs no advocate. As Bennett Reimer (2005) so eloquently suggests, rather than “persuade people to buy what we are selling, we should make what we are selling so valuable and pertinent to their musical lives that they are delighted to get as much of it as they can” (141). If our school music programs were important and relevant to our society, by Reimer’s logic, we would no longer need to boast the nonmusical benefits of music instruction. If our programs were truly culturally relevant, creative, and valuable to the larger school community, administrators would not dare eliminate them from our schools. As Bowman (2005) reminds us:

The need to advocate strenuously for music education is frequently due to musical or educational failings. Conversely, where the power and value of music and of educational endeavours are evident to people, it is seldom necessary to mount advocacy campaigns. Music’s meaning and potency in people’s lives is what drives support for educational endeavours, not noble-sounding promises. (126)

### Becoming Culturally Relevant

For years, many within the profession have called for reform in the content and delivery of American school music education. Often, these calls are argued on the bases that (a) music experienced in school holds little similarity to music experienced outside of school; (b) school music is Euro-centric and elitist; (c) the ways students learn music in school is dissimilar to the ways people learn music outside of school; and (d) school music emphasizes conformity, whereas music outside of school emphasizes creativity. While there is much overlap between them, critics of school music might be categorized according to two broad camps—those who advocate change of content so that school music becomes more culturally relevant, and those who advocate change of teaching so that school music becomes more democratic. We would like to suggest that school music become more culturally relevant and democratic so that it is more securely situated within the American school curriculum.

Many school music programs have embraced world music pedagogy to recognize the musical contributions of

many cultures. African drumming, mariachi, salsa, and gamelan ensembles are all wonderful examples of music-making from around the world, and they certainly broaden students' global and musical perspectives. But while these ensembles may reflect a variety of world music, they may not be *culturally relevant* to American students. African drumming may be no more relevant to a black student than a white student. Mariachi ensembles may be relevant to children of Mexican-born immigrants, but not all Hispanic students are Mexican-born or even of Mexican ethnicity. As educators we have to be careful about our assumptions of what is relevant to our students; this requires knowing our students' social and cultural background as well as their race. Ironically, often the least culturally and socially relevant ensembles are traditional bands, orchestras, and choruses. This is not a statement of the authors' values, but simply an observation; with diminishing orchestra audiences, a shrinking number of classical and jazz record sales, and very few professional wind bands, these ensembles hold very little relevance to modern American society outside of the school setting.

While our traditional band, orchestra, and choir (BOC) ensembles sometimes serve a large number of students, this body may not be representative of the overall student population. Students of color, particularly nonwhite Hispanic students, are underrepresented in our music programs and ensembles (Elpus and Abril 2011). And while our canon of BOC repertoire is deeply rooted in the Western classical tradition, fewer and fewer of our students identify with a Western European heritage. According to 2007–2008 surveys collected by the National Center for Education Statistics, 42 percent of public school students identified as nonwhite (2009). BOC ensembles were once thought to be a way to assimilate immigrant children into American schools, but contemporary educators and scholars agree that schools should reflect diversity, not the dominant white ideology that inevitably results from a “melting pot” mentality. A major goal of education, James Banks (1993) writes, “is to reform the school and other educational institutions so that students from diverse racial, ethnic, and social-class groups will experience educational equality” (3).

World music and traditional ensembles lack cultural relevance in many instances, but popular musics often maintain relevance across race, ethnicity, class, gender, and language. Popular music, in its vast and all-encompassing definition, is widely enjoyed by most all American students regardless of ethnicity or cultural background. The popular music industry demonstrates its relevance each year through billions of dollars in revenue and a far-reaching global market. Music educators recognized the need to embrace popular music at the Tanglewood Symposium in 1968, but we often fail to incorporate popular music ensembles in our schools. There are few resources or written curricula for popular music ensembles, and they are rarely part of Music Educators Association or NAFME conferences;

the local Guitar Center does more to promote the education and development of popular music each year than our schools or national conference, and their businesses are booming.

Perhaps the greatest obstacle in the integration of popular music and popular music ensembles into our schools is ourselves. When asked about the challenges of starting popular music programs, many practitioners confess they have no idea where to begin. Because music education programs rarely require instrumental methods courses on instruments used in popular music, or classes on sequencing MIDI files, recording audio, and production, many music educators do not possess these skill sets (Springer and Gooding forthcoming). It is difficult to incorporate popular music into our school music programs when music teachers have no training or background in popular music styles. Perhaps it is time that we rethink *who* can become a music teacher in the future. Maybe the entry point to music education should not be solely based on performance of classical repertoire on an instrument or voice. If we want our school music programs to become more relevant to society, then our college music teacher education programs need to become more inclusive of musicians who do not fit the traditional BOC mold. If the National Association of Schools of Music (NASM) were to consider requiring popular music classes for music teacher preparation programs, this might alleviate some of the challenges of integrating popular music into our school curricula.

### Becoming as Creative as We Say We Are

The MEPR suggests that music lends itself to creative expression. However, careful observation of music teachers reveals little evidence of the creative national standards (composing, arranging, improvising) in our music classrooms (Orman 2002). Just as the traditional BOC ensembles may in many situations be culturally irrelevant, they are also generally re-creative, not creative, ensembles. Even many jazz band directors spend the majority of rehearsal teaching repertoire for concerts and festivals rather than focusing on creative elements such as improvisation (Schopp 2006).

Allsup (2003) argues that the contemporary popular music tradition, however, is not only culturally relevant, but also creative. Smaller ensembles are more conducive to creative opportunities, and performers of popular music styles are often called upon to improvise, compose, and/or arrange music. Unfortunately, the most creative musicians in our schools may be among the least likely to join our school music programs. Students interested in leading their own garage bands or producing original music using sequencing and recording software may not see any connection between their creative music efforts and what their school has to offer them. Instead of competing for resources with math and science, or worse, contending that music can

improve test scores, music educators can demonstrate the societal value of music by the creative nature of their program (Kos 2010). Importantly, creativity is not a nonmusical benefit; creativity is an essential element of musicianship.

## CONCLUSION

In 1922 the official slogan of the Music Supervisors National Conference was “Music for every child, and every child for music.” Nearly a hundred years later we still cannot claim that we have fulfilled this goal, but it is not because we have not tried to accomplish it through our advocacy efforts; it is, in large part, because we have not altered our product to reflect the ways music is valued within society (Kratz 2007). Within the Music Educators National Conference’s 1930 “Statement of Beliefs and Purpose” is the belief that a vital part of one’s musical education is the carryover of school music training into the musical, social, and home life of the community (Morgan 1951), but since the 1930s our profession has done little to embrace this call for carryover into the community.

We want to be clear—school music education is a big enough field to both advance our practices and preserve our treasured musical heritage. To choose one or the other would do little to advance the availability and viability of music in our schools. The fact is that in many communities, traditional BOC programs *are* culturally relevant. Furthermore, many BOC programs *are* taught in ways that engage students creatively and democratically. The authors wish to affirm our BOC traditions, and those educators devoted to them, while expanding the vision to include popular music, improvisation, composition, music technology, and world music (among others) for the benefit of all. We do not suggest an abandonment of BOCs in communities where these ensembles are culturally relevant and where student learning is truly creative and democratic, but in communities and/or programs where this is not the case, a pragmatic embrace of change, we would suggest, might be the best way of preserving the music program.

Last, advocacy organizations such as the MEPR, through political efforts, can greatly contribute to music education becoming more securely situated within public school curricula, but they need to change their approach; rather than attempting to situate music education within a post-*Sputnik* mindset about what is important in education, effort would be better spent challenging and redirecting discussion about national education aims. American education historian Diane Ravitch (2013) reminds us that the original aims of American public education were far broader and more humanistic than simple workforce preparation, yet workforce preparation drives American school curricula today, thus minimizing music’s value in the curriculum. Education philosopher Nel Noddings (2003) urges the American

public to return to aims talks and reexamine assumptions about the purposes of public education. Music education advocacy organizations such as the MEPR are in a unique position to lead these discussions and shift public policy from increasing math scores toward increasing happiness; from creating global competitors toward developing local contributors; from regurgitating fact toward heightening understanding. This redirection of the public consciousness would help solidify music as an equally important ingredient in a liberal education in a way that affirms the values our profession established at Tanglewood and Tallahassee.

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