

## **Fine Arts Advocacy: Whose Job Is It?**

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Whose job is it, really? And why do we have to fight to keep our discipline alive in the curriculum? Why does not everyone understand the importance of the arts in a well-balanced education for all Texas schoolchildren? The reality is that in these days of high stakes accountability and testing combined with an educational philosophy driven by local control, it is a battle that we will have to continue to fight at every level. The reality is that advocacy truly is a responsibility for each of us.

At the local level, much of the frustration we experience as music educators comes from dealing with the ongoing challenges of fighting for our programs, such as budget, scheduling or staffing issues. How do we overcome what sometimes seem to be insurmountable obstacles? The perhaps overly simplified answer is that the most effective advocacy tool we all possess is a music program that is valued by students, parents, administration, and community. It is difficult for an administration or board of education to make significant cuts to such a program, and if they do, the parents and stakeholders in the community must make their discontent known.

### **Curricular Nature of Fine Arts**

How do we make sure our program is perceived as highly valued in light of the fact that most people do not take our subject as seriously as we do? First we must stress the curricular nature of our discipline as defined in law and state board rule. The uninformed typically view music education as extracurricular, contest-driven, possessive of students, and not academic --- simply an activity. At every possible opportunity, we must demonstrate the fact that we are a part of the academic mainstream and point to the protection for our programs that is provided in the law.

Beyond demonstrating our academic nature, we must develop an assessment tool and always be cognizant of the fact that the music we program and the composers we study say the most about the quality of what we teach. Our role is to provide students with meaningful, rigorous experiences in the arts, not simply to teach instruments and songs. We must convince our audience that we are not in the entertainment business but in the business of educating children through the arts.

### **Creating Visibility for Fine Arts at the State Level**

Support at the state level is also critical to a continued presence of fine arts in our schools. In Texas, we are fortunate to have a unified state music and arts education advocacy infrastructure in place, primarily driven by TMEA. As a result of these efforts, fine arts holds its most prominent place in law and rule that it has ever held. Nevertheless, keeping fine arts in that position is always a challenge.

No politician purposely targets the arts for cuts and elimination, yet we get caught in the backwash of other legislation driven to cure the ills of public education. The reality, however, is that with limited instructional minutes in a school day, adding more physical activity or math or science or more graduation requirements can take away the opportunity for arts study, and as you know, this happens many times at the district level.

House Bill 5, signed into law during June of 2014, provided more flexibility in graduation programs for fine arts students than ever before, but many school districts immediately took that flexibility away with added local requirements. This is a situation where the responsibility to monitor and address such action circles back to local arts advocates.

### **Fine Arts as Inclusive Terminology**

Beyond the confines of our own music rooms, we must also remember that there is

strength in numbers. The word *music* does not appear anywhere in the 1600 pages of Texas law. The word in law is *fine arts*, and *fine arts* is defined in State Board of Education (SBOE) rule as *music, art, theatre, and dance*. Take advantage of every opportunity to display collaboration and integration within your campus fine arts department. Unless triggered by a specific music issue, make sure any advocacy efforts are not limited to your band, choir or orchestra but reflect the importance of all four fine arts disciplines.

As an example, the chair of the Senate Education Committee during this past legislative session was an artist. Both the current chair and vice-chair of the SBOE have children involved in musical theatre. Thus, our lobbying efforts at the capitol and with the State Board use the words *fine arts* in place of the word *music*, which is rarely mentioned. In fact, testimony presented at the capitol is quite often given under the umbrella of Texas Coalition for Quality Arts Education (TCQAE) rather than simply from TMEA. That same unified message should be delivered at the local level. You never know which fine arts subject may resonate with a decision maker.

### **Steps Toward Advocacy**

So, what can you do to help fight the fight at every level? First of all, arm yourself with the latest advocacy materials supporting the role of the arts in the education of Texas schoolchildren. The TMEA website offers such a resource, [www.tmea.org](http://www.tmea.org), as does <http://www.nammfoundation.org/why-music-matters/why-learn-play-music> and [www.americansforthearts.org](http://www.americansforthearts.org). Research is becoming more and more compelling for why arts education is important, and this research is not coming from or distributed only by arts supporters but publications like *Scientific American* and *Education Week*.

Secondly, get involved in election campaigns. In Texas, TCQAE has recently distributed

a survey to every candidate running for the Texas legislature or the State Board of Education. The results will be published in the November *Southwestern Musician*, linked from the TMEA website, and available at [goarts.org](http://goarts.org). You, as well as other interested arts supporters in your district, should go online and register at [www.goarts.org](http://www.goarts.org). Throughout the next legislative session beginning in January, all registrants will receive updates on any legislative activity that could negatively impact fine arts education. Necessary calls to action will come through this site.

Finally, once the election is complete, you should give your senator or representative a call and ask them to attend a holiday concert or visit an elementary music classroom. Even 3-5 calls to a legislator's office puts the arts on their radar as a follow-up to the questionnaire we sent them.

Certainly, when you need assistance, call me in the TMEA office. My contact information is on the TMEA website. As executive director of TMEA, chair of the Texas Coalition for Quality Arts Education, and member of the Board of the SHSU Center for Music Education, I will help in any way I can.

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