

Developing Skill and Awareness as an Advocate for Music Education

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Advocacy continues to become an increasingly more important aspect of a music educator's job description. Whether one is recruiting new students, speaking with parents, or lobbying a legislator, the ability to present a compelling and convincing point of view can often make the difference between having a good program and a superior one, perhaps even including whether or not your primary ensemble is scheduled to meet during the school day!

A music program director is in a unique position of high visibility and is presumed to be highly knowledgeable. A successful advocate, then, is one who seizes every opportunity to speak on behalf of and in support of his/her students and music program. The purpose of advocacy could be calling attention to the positive benefits of learning to play an instrument, participation in a strong and supportive organization, and publicizing the positive results and successes of students, or simply justifying why students and parents should continue to spend their money and sacrifice their most important commodity – time – in order to attain the next artistic, competitive, or social goal. Additionally, the director must be able to articulate the vision of the program, recognizing and communicating future opportunities for students, as well as raising awareness of the need for parents to be extremely well informed prior to making a choice that could impact the music education of their child.

In preparation for becoming a serious advocate, there are three areas of skill that must be developed:

1. Be knowledgeable

2. Communicate openly, honestly, and clearly, and
3. Build and maintain relationships.

While each of these is important separately, at times they work together.

Knowledge

First, the depth and range of a director's knowledge and experience is crucial. One must expect to be challenged when presenting information to a parent group or an administrator – a by-product of the data-driven world in which we must operate – and be able to provide acceptable answers to their questions. It is necessary to have the most accurate and up-to-date information should one, for example, submit scientific studies about the positive influences of music study. If a study cited by a director is outdated, or worse, is found to be dubious or even incorrect, then all subsequent data that is referenced by that presenter will be called into question. In contrast, some of the most powerful data can be drawn from the positive responses to surveys of one's current and/or former students and their parents, after they have had the opportunity to reflect on their experiences in the music program.

Communication

Next, a successful advocate must be able to communicate clearly and honestly, whether to the parents of an individual student, a colleague, their principal, or a group of several hundred students and adults. The information must not only be accurate, as mentioned earlier, but also understandable. It is essential to take the time to explain what the data means, and why it is applicable. It is important to consider that while you may be speaking with a parent of an incoming student who has no prior knowledge of the music program, that parent might be a former band member (or even a director!).

Remember to consider your audience, because the issues that are important to students, parents, administrators, or even other teachers can be vastly different. It is important to know what your audience is thinking and what items are important to them. One must try to understand the perspective of the audience prior to attempting to convince them of anything. In particular, one may have limited time in which to give a presentation, and the last thing you want to do is have someone feel like their time is being wasted listening to items that don't concern them. Unfortunately, the things that are of critical importance to you, such as improving the quality of the program, may not be the most important thing to your audience, especially if the program is already somewhat successful.

Here are some of the items that are important to a potential audience an advocate may encounter. The list may vary according to one's location and/or specific issues relating to the program or school.

District and School Administrators

- Budget
- Community involvement and visibility
- Dropout rate
- Interscholastic competition
- Master Schedules
- Personnel Units, aka FTE's
- Positive promotion of the school and school district
- Scholarships

- State indicators of academic success
- Students are involved in organizations that foster loyalty to the school and increase participation in school activities
- Successful and well-rounded Alumni
- Test scores
- Other Academic Teachers
- Intrinsically motivated students
- Students are learning the material in their class
- Students are passing their class and behaving appropriately
- Students communicate that all their classes are important
- Test scores

Parents

- Their child is happy, safe, and being treated fairly
- Their child is learning and in a positive academic and social environment
- Their child is preparing for life after high school
- Directors are clear about time commitments
- Directors communicate clearly and frequently
- Positive peer relationships
- Potential scholarship and career opportunities

Important Items to Students

- They are having fun
- They are good at what they do

- They have a sense of belonging
- They can develop important and appropriate relationships with their peers and with adults
- They are a member of a successful organization
- They are significant and are a part of the decision-making process
- Their teachers are clear and trustworthy
- They know the relevance of what they doing

Relationships

Third, one must build and maintain significant relationships. By this, I certainly mean healthy and positive relationships between a director and his/her students, parents, and administrators. In addition, an advocate must look for and point out connections between the arts and other academic areas to help justify why music education should be an important aspect of a child's education. With just a bit of effort, it's not difficult to find connections between the artistic vocabulary and those pertaining to science, math, history, and literacy. It also pays for an advocate to demonstrate fluency with terms that are becoming more common in other academic areas (i.e., backward design, differentiation, vertical alignment, small group instruction, etc.).

A common trap that ensnares some advocates is the reliance on the importance of the non-artistic skills, such as teamwork, that students can develop as a result of their participation in a school music organization. Keep in mind that many of these skills can be learned in a wide variety of other organizations, both curricular and extra-curricular as well as outside of the school environment. For example, if a student can learn teamwork in an area outside of music, then this is a much less compelling reason for that student to

join band, choir, or orchestra, or perhaps to remain a member of the ensemble after several years. Instead, focus on the progressive development of certain skills and relate them to music specifically; then, provide a direct connection to an area that could become of vital importance to that student's life or career. An example that I have used successfully many times is that of the performance skills that my students learned in band. It's not difficult to draw a connection between auditioning for a spot in All-Region Band and a lawyer arguing a case in court...a surgeon operating on a patient...or for a teacher, what we do every single day.

Here are a few of these so-called "side effects" that I believe to be both particularly applicable to music education, as well as easily defensible:

- Appreciation for the arts
- Cultural Awareness
- Fostering life-long intellectual curiosity
- Performance skills
- Perseverance/Persistence/Grit
- Pursuit of Excellence
- Risk Taking
- Working under pressure

The best news for a potential advocate is that there are many resources available to help make a case for the importance of music education. These can be people or organizations that may have access to information that you as a public school music educator do not have or do not have the time to locate. Some of the most helpful may be right in one's neighborhood:

- Business and community leaders who understand the value of music education (which they may have learned through their own participation in a successful band, choir, or orchestra!)
- Other faculty members in your school who participated in a successful music organization
- School counselors and librarians
- Satisfied parents of your former students
- University faculty or admissions officers
- Museum curators

Some resources may be a bit further afield, though equally valuable:

- Successful alumni who have gone on to become successful in their chosen career field
- Guest artists who acknowledge the importance of their own school music organization in their own success

Of course, the wonder of technology and the Internet can lead to valuable and meaningful data that is as close as one's fingertips. It is virtually impossible to provide a comprehensive list of resources, although each state will likely have someone in its respective Music Education Association offices who can generate a list.

Conclusion

Remind yourself that as a director, you are in a highly influential position that offers you the possibility of developing not just outstanding musicians but future consumers of the arts. One of those young students in your ensemble may turn out to become someone with power or influence...a state level elected official...school board

member... administrator... pop star... or someone fabulously wealthy with large amounts of money they are willing to donate to say, a fine arts organization. Every moment you spend with your students, their parents, and your administration is another opportunity for you to be an advocate for music education, and to drive home the far-reaching importance of the long-term, sequential study of music. Music education may reach your students in a way that no other subject or activity can – and your influence can last lifetimes. Make the most of it!

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