

Tricks of the Trade: An Arts Coalition Wins a Big Battle in Georgia

by John Benham

School music teachers and dealers throughout the country may some day want to thank Dr. John Benham and associate John Helmerger for taking on a huge new project in Georgia.

"We think it's the most significant project we've ever undertaken, and it could have the longest-lasting ramifications of anything we've ever done," Benham said.

What Benham was talking about is a project in which he and Helmerger will analyze 60 school districts in the state and prepare a report that—they hope—will be used as a resource by state officials to expand music and other arts programs throughout Georgia's school districts. If the study accomplishes that goal, it could well serve as a model for studies throughout the country that could help keep school music programs alive.

The analysis will cover the 28 largest districts in Georgia, plus 32 other randomly selected districts, including well over 500,000 students. The study will document the number of music teachers in each district, the enrollment by grade, at what grade level music education typically starts, attitudes on whether music is curricular or extracurricular, average class sizes, attrition rates and a host of other information. "To my knowledge, it's the first study of its type and breadth," Benham said.

Once the study is done at the end of February, Benham noted, it will supply benchmarks that will enable a school district to compare itself with others. The study is also expected to lead to the development of proposals for Georgia's board of education and legislature to institute standards for music and arts education throughout the state.

Benham and Helmerger have been commissioned to prepare the report by the Georgia Coalition for the Arts, an influential organization that includes a broad array of music and arts groups. The project, he explained, came out of his involvement in preventing proposed school music program cuts at one of the state's premier school districts in suburban Atlanta. The school district proposed cutting the jobs of 200 out of 245 music and arts teachers, which would have eliminated all music performance programs for 84,000 kids.

"The reason they wanted to make the cuts is that they were going to require all kids to go into a vocational-technical curriculum, and the only way to hire those teachers would have been to fire the music teachers," Benham said.

Once Benham helped the parents to organize, however, they quickly thwarted the attempt to cut the music programs. "Within two weeks, the district rescinded its proposal and restored all the positions," Benham noted. As a result of what happened in that one school district, a wide spectrum of music and arts groups in Georgia speeded up their plans to form the statewide coalition for arts and education now known as the Georgia Coalition for the Arts.

Explained Benham: "The people who were organizing the coalition invited us to do a workshop for them on arts advocacy at the state level, which we did in June. Then they asked us to do a written report to analyze school music programs in the whole state of Georgia in the same way that we usually analyze an individual district." The Georgia Board of Education has already said that it will recognize the report as a valid study for use in setting music education standards.

"The beauty of this situation is that all the arts coalitions have come together," Benham said. "It isn't just music educators. It includes band, orchestra, choir, music education associations, arts councils that don't even have anything to do with education, and even the state PTA. We have broadened our political base substantially, which gives us much more input in the decision-making process. This is a really significant act of unity, which has been lacking in the profession for a long time."

Now that the music and arts supporters have joined forces, they represent a much more potent political force, Benham noted. "When we won in that one school district, the news traveled around the state in a hurry. Every school administrator in the state is now aware of what can happen when you take on the arts people. That's what we need to do. We need to wake people up because so much of this is political."

Benham, whose Music In World Cultures organization is based in St. Bonifacius, MN, has specialized in saving school music programs since 1991. His 116-page workbook, "How to Save your School Music Program: A Handbook for the Music Advocate," is available for \$17.95. He urges anyone interested in saving school music programs to call him at (612) 446-4246. ■

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