

John Benham

A QUARTERLY REPORT ON EFFORTS TO SAVE MUSIC EDUCATION PROGRAMS



# What to do When the Budget Cuts Come

Let's face it: Even school music programs in districts where parents and community members have formed booster organizations and administrative liaison teams and have taken other proactive positions can some day end up facing cuts. But according to John Benham, founder of Music in World Cultures, there are several ways to 'save'—and perhaps even improve—existing programs.

The process involves four phases:

- Collection and interpretation of data. "The first thing you have to do is identify what the problems really are," he says. "Sometimes what is announced as a potential cut is really a symptom of the actual problem." What is often termed a "budget crisis" is really a reflection of an administrator's true philosophy on education. While there may be a budget crisis, the decision of where to cut first is a philosophical one. "We've talked many times about the economic viability of a music program—you don't save any money by cutting it," notes Benham.

The first step is to identify the issues being discussed. Are they financial? Educational? Adult or student? Once you've identified them, look at each from four perspectives:

(1) What will the impact of the recommended changes be on the fac-

ulty (how many will be cut, how many will stay, and what that will do to their class loads)?

(2) What will the curricular impact be?

(3) What will the impact be on students' opportunities to participate in school music programs?

(4) What are the district budget ramifications?

"The next bit of data you need is what the current loads of your music faculty are," Benham says. "How

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many students are enrolled by grade and by school in each band, choir or orchestra?" Once you have this information, you can lay out a profile of enrollment for each school. You can also compare the average loads of your music performance faculty with the loads of other faculty.

- Preparing a proposal. When it comes to actually writing the proposal, Benham says there is a definite format to follow that has proven successful time and again.

First, state in the introductory section that you're not trying to cause trouble but that you're providing input so there can be a collaborative

decision-making process. "Next, we like to include some of the recent data on why music education is important for kids—such as the brain research data," notes Benham.

Following this 'reminder' about the benefits of music is a 'historical picture' of the district—any significant honors or recognitions that the district has received, as well as a history of the program or any previous cuts.

After these introductory elements the administrative proposal is outlined and the short- and long-term implications of those proposed changes are addressed.

- Presenting the proposal. At this point any teachers who have been involved in the process step aside. "The idea with having the parents in charge is they can appear to be collaborative and cooperative, and at the same time carry the authority and power of a tax payer or voter."

According to Benham, the ideal situation is for the parents to take their proposal and deliver it to administration and board members individually. "We like to have them meet as a committee of two or three with each administrator and school board member, telling them that they're not there to cause trouble, but they think the information shown in their proposal indicates that music is a vital part of our kids' education," he says.



During these 'individual presentations', the parent committee can get an idea of the number of yes, no, and undecided votes. "The ones you want to work on carefully are the undecided votes," suggests Benham. "Remember, you just need a majority vote, so find out how many that takes."

The next step in presenting the proposal is for the parents' group to actually make a presentation at a public board meeting. "The first thing they're going for is delaying the decision to make any cuts and having a task force—made up of administrators, music teachers, non-music teachers, and adults in the community—appointed by the school board to study these issues and report back to them," says Benham. "Because once you delay a change, it's harder for them to make the cut. It's the first step in accessing parent power."

- Following up. While there is certainly a lot of work involved in following this process, it has proven to be quite successful. "In over 95% of the cases, we win," explains Benham. "And unfortunately, winning that strongly can sometimes create revenge cycles, so that one or more administrators who have been publicly embarrassed may come after you any way they can. So you really have to be on your toes, and you need to work toward restoring those relationships."

*If you would like a detailed account of the process outlined in this article, you can purchase a copy of John Benham's book *How to Save Your School Music Program*. Cost is \$17.95, plus shipping and handling. To order—or if you have any questions about information presented in this series—contact Benham at (612) 446-4246.*