

MUSIC WARRIORS

Six who make a difference.

By Herb Nolan

Across the nation, school music has its back to the wall. Reform movements, tax payer rebellions and school boards strapped for cash have sucker-punched the arts. If that weren't enough school music continues to grapple with its old nemesis—drop outs and plain old apathy. Today, music educators and retailers agree things are tough, but they're not tossing in the towel—many are fighting back. In the pages ahead, *Music Inc.* profiles six who are battling for the health, growth and prosperity of music in America's schools. They represent both the retailer and educator communities, two constituencies who understand that beyond the day-to-day routine of retailing and teaching, they share a common bond—the future of the nation's youth. While their points of view may differ, their weapons are the same—commitment, innovation and hard work. And the goals are non-negotiable.

John Benham,
Ph.D.



"It costs more to kill a music program than to save it."

John Benham saves school music programs. He used to call it a hobby, in fact he still does,

but in reality keeping music and arts alive in schools has become a full-time job.

He's covered 16 states working with educators and speaking to anyone who will listen to his views on the future of school music. Until recently he didn't charge for his services, but salvaging funding for others almost squashed his.

A doctor of music education who taught at the elementary and college levels, Benham has worked in music retailing, owned a musical instrument repair business for 20 years, is a full-time church minister, and when the phone rings, he's a consultant who battles to

keep music programs off the budgetary chopping block.

"It started when I moved back to Minnesota and into the Mounds View school district," Benham said. "The second week there, a tax levy failed and the schools needed to cut several million dollars from the budget—and they targeted music."

Because of his music background, Benham ended up on the parents' committee to try and save the program. It was here that he made a fundamental discovery on how to defend music and the arts—it costs more to kill music programs than to save them.

"It was so obvious," said Benham of the principle he calls Reverse Economics. "If a music teacher's student load is larger than that of another classroom teacher (and it normally is) the music program is the less expensive program." Moreover, he found that when all or part of an elementary music program is cut, it hurts the school system's entire program.

"They cut the elementary program with assumption that the kids will start [music] in the seventh grade. Well, they don't. What they don't understand is that kids don't start later—all our research bears that out. If kids don't start their training in the creative arts in the elementary schools, they just don't do it. It all has to do with at what age kids stop being willing to stick their necks out and perform for others. In other words, they stop taking risks."

Benham believes he can save all or part of almost any school music program if given the chance. Typically the cry for help comes at the eleventh hour, if it comes at all.

For Benham the scenario goes like this: He gets a phone call that a school music program is on the block and he's got 72 hours to ride to the rescue. "I'll get anywhere from two days to a week's notice—that's very common."

When time is critical, Benham starts getting whatever statistics (enrollment, number of teachers, number of students at each grade level) he can over the phone. "When I get the numbers I can start reconciling all the figures and usually demonstrate in a variety of ways that [cutting music and the arts] is going to cost the school money . . . I draw up a proposal that runs anywhere from eight-to-18 pages. It's a statistical study of the financial ramifications, the curricular ramifications and impact on student participation," said Benham, who outlined his techniques in a book called, "Save Your Music Program."

"We don't win 100 percent, but we usually do pretty well," Benham said. In fact, the

consultant credits his single defeat to a teacher who panicked during a critical point in the proposal's presentation and demanded to know why the school board always cut funds from her side of the budget and not the other. The result—both sides were cut. "That district has never recovered," Benham said.

How can the music industry help? Benham feels, it should fund a full-time consultant. He said he has submitted a proposal to the National Association of Band Instrument Manufacturers (NABIM) detailing what it would cost to retain one. "There is no doubt in my mind that this trend [eliminating arts programs from the schools] can be reversed, and that we can set up a consulting team to attack this thing nationally, but you can only do it so long as a hobby."