

The John Benham UPDATE



A bimonthly report on efforts to save music education programs

Solving adult problems at the expense of children

Music store owners are well aware of the budgetary issues that threaten music education and other arts programs. But according to music education advocate John Benham, an even more insidious threat is posed by school

reform efforts. What, you might ask, could possibly be wrong with reforming our schools? "Whenever you hear the words 'educational reform,' cautions Benham, "remember that 'reform' means 'change.' It does not necessarily mean 'improvement.'"

In assessing a so-called reform issue, Benham suggests asking two key questions: What are the adult issues involved, and what are the student issues? According to Benham, the secret to accomplishing *real* reform is to solve the adult issues by bringing about positive change for kids.

Unfortunately, most reform takes the opposite approach. We try to solve adult problems—taxes, political agendas, teachers' salaries, and so on—and hope the kids will benefit as a result.

The biggest reform issue of the moment is school-to-work. This

educational initiative requires students in Grade 8—or by Grade 10 at the latest—to decide whether they want to remain in the college prep track or switch to a vocational-technical, or "vo-tech," track. Benham recalls, "My first experience with school-to-work took place when a school district was going to cut huge numbers of arts teachers. At first, they said it was for budgetary reasons. We went and studied the issue and found that they weren't in any kind of budget trouble for at least three years." However, music education supporters did uncover a letter that revealed the real reason for the proposed cuts: The district was chasing federal vo-tech dollars. The letter was from a district-level assistant superintendent to the director of the state Board of Education. In it, the assistant superintendent voiced his support for a proposed law that would require all students to take at least one full year of vocational-technical training in ninth grade. Afterward, in their sophomore year, students could still opt for the college prep track if they so desired, but they would have to make up those ninth-grade college prep courses they had missed.

Why would a school district consider such an arrangement? Benham explains, "We were dealing here with a state that had a large welfare burden. They were saying, 'If we can at least give these kids job training and they drop out of school in ninth or tenth grade, at least they're employable and we don't have to have them on welfare.' It's part of the desire to get rid of welfare." That, of course, is definitely an adult problem. And, it's a problem that school-to-work is unlikely to resolve. As Benham puts it, "Can a student really be prepared to deal in today's world, which is a global economy, a global marketplace,

with no general education or just a minimal general education, and some vo-tech training? Not likely.”

Not only is school-to-work unlikely to resolve adult issues, it is sure to have a serious negative impact on students. Benham summarizes the issue thus: “If you force a kid in Grade 8 or at least by Grade 10 to make this decision, what you are saying is, ‘We’re not going to *educate* you, we’re going to *train* you.’ Furthermore, you’ve taken away from them educational equal opportunity and equal job opportunity, because when you’re making this choice at such an early age, especially if you’re a kid who doesn’t get the right help from your parents, it’s not an informed choice.” Public education was instituted on the belief that an informed citizenry is a prerequisite for a democratic government. Depriving large numbers of students of an education—even when it’s done under the guise of “choice”—cannot be good for the future of our country.

A more immediate repercussion—and one that affects school music dealers directly—is that arts education programs will be cut in order to free up teacher resources for vo-tech programs. Benham quotes the letter from the assistant superintendent mentioned above: “The only problem I can foresee in requiring this vo-tech education,” wrote the official, “is that the teacher resources will have to come from areas like art and music

and other electives, including foreign languages, because that’s the only way we’ll have enough money to provide for the teacher resources.” Benham explains, “When you mandate school-to-work, right now you get federal monies, so it doesn’t cost the schools anything to add these vo-tech teachers.” But as soon as the federal government drops its financial support—which invariably happens with education initiatives such as these—the state and local district are stuck with the mandate to continue the program, but no funding for it. They’re forced to make cuts where they can—and that invariably means arts education.

Benham points out that it’s hard for financially strapped school districts to turn their backs on school-to-work monies. But, he cautions, this latest “school reform” measure is yet another example of trying to solve adult problems at the expense of students. Not only will it hurt our schools in the long run, it can have disastrous effects on the school music industry.

To read more about the issues involved in school-to-work, John Benham suggests visiting the Web site of Richmond (Va.) Times-Dispatch columnist Robert Holland at <http://www2.southwind.net/~educate/bob.html>.

Anyone who needs help to save or restore a music program should contact John Benham at (612) 446-4246.