

Arts education advocates bring in the big gun

Parents hire nationally known savior of school music programs

By Diane Loupe
STAFF WRITER

When school arts programs are threatened, John Benham gets the call.

The ethnomusicologist has a national reputation as the white knight who rides in to rescue artists in distress.

Benham, president of Music in World Cultures Inc., will be in Gwinnett County on Tuesday and Wednesday to meet with teachers, parents and community members and to analyze the Gwinnett school board's budget for arts programs.

A meeting Tuesday for teachers only will be held from 5 to 8 p.m. at Trinity Lutheran Church, 1826 Killian Hill Road, just north of U.S. 78 in Lilburn. A meeting open to the general public will start Wednesday at 7 p.m. at the First United Methodist Church at 850 Beaver Ruin Road, between Indian Trail and Buford Highway in Norcross.

An ordained Baptist minister, Benham's company helps missionaries produce indigenous hymn books and music literacy programs for Third World citizens. But he's also the author of "How to Save Your School Music Program: A Handbook for the Music Advocate" and is credited with reinstating more than \$16.3 million in budgetary reductions in music.

He has traveled to 33 states and 44 Canadian provinces in the past 14 years and brags that he has "never lost a curriculum." He's based in St. Bonifacius, Minn., a suburb of St. Paul-Minneapolis.

He's the father of "reverse economics," in which he argues that most music teachers carry

a larger class size than other teachers. Cutting them out won't save money because the system will have to hire more teachers for the students, he argues.

And he seeks to dispel the idea that fine arts classes are extracurricular activities.

"Music and art are primarily intellectual activities, not extracurricular ones," Benham said, "Not outside the intellect."

A public meeting will start Wednesday at 7 p.m. at First United Methodist.

His consulting fee, which he described as several thousand dollars plus expenses, is being partially underwritten by a grant from National Association of Band Instrument Manufacturers, a trade group representing publishers of sheet music and manufacturers of school band and orchestra instruments.

Sherry McCanless, a leader of the newly formed Coalition of Gwinnett County Parents for Fine Arts, says the group is collecting donations to defray Benham's fee.

For more information, call Sherry McCanless 339-6786, or Gail Williamson 822-1874.

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