

# Saving School Music Programs— Music Activism

By John Benham



As politicians scramble to get re-elected, budget cuts become more and more the norm. Unfor-

tunately, one of the first areas to feel the pain is usually the local school music program. Concerned parents and instrument dealers don't have to take these cuts lying down. You *can* make a difference!

In the eleven years I've been helping save school music programs, either myself or the people who've attended my seminars have managed to ward off over \$7,500,000 in budget cuts in 24 different states and Canada—most of that in the last two or three years.

There are three keys to preventing music program cuts. Number one is to stay informed about what's happening in your school district. In over 90% of the cases I've dealt with, the teachers have received less than seven days notice that their programs were being cut. Dealers have to keep involved to know what's going on in advance.

Secondly, and probably most importantly, is teacher unity. Educators have to stop fighting and start focusing on student needs. Dealers can help support this process.

Thirdly, one of our major goals is to turn the power of decision-making over to the parents. Education has become an exclusive club. I deal with more and

more educators who have been ordered not to tell parents that cuts were coming. Involved music dealers can open up this process to build parental involvement and community awareness in their markets.

Basically, our job is to go in and incite a riot—in as nice a way as possible. I usually find out that a school music program is in danger about three days in advance. Typically, I fly into a school district on a Friday so I can talk to the music teachers. There are issues to deal with other than what's being cut, such as teacher relations and priorities. I have to unify the teachers and the industry first.

Next, I get together all the statistics and study the financial ramifications of the case. I've developed the concept of *reverse economics* to show administrators that they don't save money when they cut music programs. If you don't get kids involved in music at the elementary level, then they are never as willing to start later.

You can go in there and give them all the philosophical stuff and they'll nod and say, "Yes, we agree with you." Then they'll cut you after you leave. But if you deal with it on their ground—show them the financial rational—then you're speaking their language.

I'll sit up most of Friday night doing the statistical analysis and developing a proposal. When you write a proposal to keep school music programs, you have to give the adminis-

tration and school board a political "out." In other words, if we draw up a proposal and show them on paper that they'll save money by *not* cutting music, then they'll have an excuse for the community. If they cut other things in other departments, people will say, "Well, how come you didn't cut music?" We give them a piece of paper so they can say: "Well, here's why we didn't—look at this study."

Saturday morning I share the proposal with the parents and community group. The last task is to motivate them to fight and to train a leadership team. Music salespeople can provide important leadership.

The only time we've lost is when the music community split amongst themselves or the parents denied there was a problem. In each of those cases, however, we've come back a year later and managed to get the school music program back.

Local retailers and the music industry at large have been very supportive of our efforts. We figure that every teaching position we save is at least \$50,000 a year in gross revenue to the music industry. And that's being very conservative.

There's no doubt in my mind that we can reverse the trend of eliminating music programs from the schools. This is a problem that music retailers and manufacturers can attack together on a national level—and win! □

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