

Three Reasons Your Arts Program is Vulnerable to Cuts

Dr. John Benham

In the face of what appears to be a national trend to eliminate or reduce arts programs, arts teachers, parents, advocates and students are finding themselves without jobs or opportunities in arts education. Unfortunately, cuts in most cases are made either without prior notice or with so little time that it appears there is no way to prevent or reverse the decision.

At least three attitude types may be present in your district indicating the vulnerability of the arts program to budget cuts.

The first of these types is **denial**. This attitude is easily identified. It generally conveys an attitude which says, "It can't/won't happen in our school district, because . . .

" . . . We have a very supportive administration."

" . . . Our district has a history of strong arts programs."

" . . . Our program is guaranteed by teacher 'prep' time."

" . . . Our district is in a state of growth."

" . . . Our school board members/superintendent all have children in the program."

" . . . Something will happen to save the program."

" . . . The board/administration is just bluffing, or trying to get an excess tax levy passed."

" . . . Our district is adopting the site-based management model and they will help prevent arts cuts."

The second attitude type is **helplessness**. This person often fails to get involved because of his sense of powerlessness, as expressed in the statement, "There is nothing I can do, because . . .

" . . . The school board/superintendent will never listen to us. They just let us vent our feelings and then do what they want anyway."

" . . . It won't help. The school board is just a rubber stamp for the administration."

" . . . It's too late now. The decision is already made."

" . . . There really is an enormous shortage of funding."

" . . . We are experiencing an enrollment decline."

" . . . Our district is going to the middle school concept and there will no longer be any room in the schedule for the arts."

" . . . Our district is reducing the number of periods in the day."

" . . . Our district/state is increasing the graduation requirements."

The third attitude type is **apathy**. This person is often difficult to identify, because he is normally not present or participating. This person will probably exhibit attitudes from either or both "denial" or "resignation," and may include teachers as well as community members. They often convey an attitude which seems to say, "I don't care," but may really be saying . . .

" . . . I am only a year or two from retiring anyway."

" . . . I won't be cut, because I have too much seniority."

" . . . I don't have time to get involved in another project."

" . . . I'll just find another job."

" . . . If I help I may end up having to serve on a committee."

" . . . There are others who will be much more able to help than I."

" . . . If we help pass a levy, the school board/administration will just put all the money into teacher/administrator salaries anyway, and we will still lose the program."

Lest this all seem too cynical, please understand that these are statements which have been used regularly in the face of arts cuts, while many have stood and watched.

Since 1981, 45 orchestra programs have been eliminated in the state of Minnesota, and there are 71,000 less students in instrumental music programs in California because of budget cuts there. The scenario is becoming too common around the country.

There is a fourth type of person . . . the **fighter**! It is time to discard our reactive adult-centered position and move into the proactive student-centered realm. We must encourage and/or remind parents and other advocates that the school district really belongs to them. We need to train them in school politics and assist them in returning power to the people to ensure student-centered decisions.

You may even be able to demonstrate that cutting

the arts program will have a reverse economic effect. In other words, the long-term budgetary effect of cutting an arts program may be more costly to the district than saving it! That is what this handbook is all about.

[NOTE: "The handbook" refers to my book "How To Save Your School Music and Arts Programs — A Handbook for the Arts Advocate." It is available through: Music In World Cultures, Inc. 6425 County Road 30, St. Bonifacius, MN 55375, USA. Please enclose \$15.00 plus \$4.00 shipping and handling per copy (US funds).]

Dr. John Benham was profiled in the last Recorder as the keynote speaker for the first Parent Power Day in Waterloo, Ontario.