

The John Benham

UPDATE



A bimonthly report on efforts to save music education programs

Introducing the 'Final Four'

This is the first in a series of four articles addressing what people can do to help prevent their local school music programs from being cut. This issue's article focuses on warning signs that may indicate a school's music program is in jeopardy. Subsequent articles will

touch on methods for preventing a music program from being cut as well as outlining the process you should go through when facing budget cuts in your district. The fourth and final article will offer a summary of what the Saving School Music program has accomplished over the last 18 years and will also serve as the final John Benham Update, as industry funding of Benham's program will be phased out by next spring.

It's no secret that school music programs across the country continue to face cancellation in the face of budget cuts. In fact, as John Benham, founder of Music in World Cultures, explains, music programs are often the first to go when

district money gets tight. Following are signs that dealers and parents should look for that may indicate that their district's program is in jeopardy.

- **Changes in the district.**

These changes may be related to new administrative personnel, or they may be evidenced by use of terms such as 'reform' or 'restructuring.' As Benham points out, "in order to become a more attractive applicant for an open position, candidates often become agents of change. But what we need to understand is that change does not necessarily guarantee improvement." Common reform or restructuring measures include changing from junior high schools to middle schools, moving from traditional seven-period days to block scheduling, or implementing school-to-work programs. "Now a big one that's coming about is after-school programs," notes Benham. "Providing funding for after-school programs was a major part of President Clinton's State of the Union address in January, and we're already hearing more and more schools talk about moving band, orchestra, and choir programs outside of the traditional school day."

- **A focus on adult versus student issues.**

Let's face it: school boards are always studying or discussing *something*, and each topic that's being discussed needs to be looked at from the student perspective. Unfortunately, this isn't always the case. If no one seems to be focusing on how a particular decision will impact the students' overall long-term education, beware.

- **Budget discussions.**

Budget discussions usually start in September, although final decisions

aren't made until June. Benham explains that "every time the budget is discussed, your program is potentially in jeopardy." Therefore, somebody—whether it be you or someone on your 'team'—needs to know what's happening in the budget process.

- **Lack of a system for assessing student achievement.**

According to Benham, a curriculum needs to be three things: specific, achievable, and measurable. And once those criteria have been met, there needs to be a system in place to assess student achievement. "Very few districts that I have worked in over the last 18 years have had a written curriculum that was being followed and also had a system of assessment in place," explains Benham. "That is to say that, in most cases, there was no specific, organized strategy for determining whether or not the curriculum was being achieved. And if there is no assessment, you have no measurable way of proving

that your music program is valid. Worse, you have no way of telling whether or not the teacher is a good teacher."

- **Detrimental attitudes.**

People's attitudes toward an issue are often determined by their involvement, and this holds true for administrators, teachers, board members, and parents. The three detrimental attitudes Benham commonly sees are those of denial, helplessness, or apathy. "The first is an attitude of denial, when a person basically says, 'Our program is secure and there's nothing that could ever touch it.' This attitude may be based on the fact that there is currently a supportive administration in place, for example, or because there are school board members who have students in the program," explains Benham.

"The second attitude is helplessness. Parents have been excluded from the decision-making process and from the process of establishing policy. This can be either by default

(because they aren't involved) or by intent (because they're specifically kept out of the process). But the law gives them the right and the responsibility for their educational programs. The third attitude is apathy. A lot of people may say, 'Well, I'm going to retire in a couple years anyway,' or 'Well, they did cut a position but I'm still OK and I still have a job.' It's that adult focus again. We have to understand that if we aren't advocates—people who care enough to put the kids first—this is our greatest area of vulnerability."

The second article of this series—scheduled for publication in the Fall 1999 issue of School Music Dealer—will address how you can prevent music programs from being eliminated if you've observed warning signs that your district's program is in jeopardy. If you have any questions about the information in this article, please contact John Benham at (612) 446-4246.