

Building Public Support For the Music Program

Preparing an Annual Report to the Community

by Catherine Sell Lenzini

In an era when programs are scrutinized and sometimes curtailed, good public relations are more important than ever. To forestall the possibility of school boards cutting funds for music programs, John Benham advocated in a November 1992 article that directors should distribute reports or newsletters that include "information on all areas of the music department. Make sure that band, orchestra, choir, and general music supporters are included in one umbrella organization; too often the band booster group ignores other music groups. Identify parents willing to serve on committees to work with the administration in solving staffing, scheduling, and curriculum problems." A written report is essential self-promotion for every music program and should be distributed to every member of the school board and all administrators. Consider giving a copy to all music parents and to leaders in the community. Benham continues to point out, "A music program with avid, well-organized community support is less vulnerable to cuts."

Besides asking school administrators to attend concerts, it is important to document the accomplishments of the music program. "Long before a budget problem arises, directors should communicate directly with administrators, faculty, and board members about the goals of the music department. This dialogue should continue over a period of years; simply inviting the superintendent to attend a band concert three days before the music program is cut will not suffice," says Benham.

In Williamsport, Pennsylvania, Richard Coulter, chairman of the music education department, has prepared an annual report for the past six years. Covering grades K-12, the report is designed "to better inform the community about the purpose, structure, and achievements of the music program." His reports were modeled after those by his predecessor, Ken Raessler, who is currently the chairman of the music department at Texas Christian University, and Ed Lisk, former music supervisor of the Oswego School District in New York. The staff of *The Instrumentalist* helped to prepare the report included with this article. Each year Coulter includes information about the program, special performances, appearances by guest artists, and pertinent statistics about the music department. Such reports are an effective way to bolster the defenses of a music program by documenting its accomplishments before any budget cuts are threatened.

Coulter recommends, "This is no time to be shy, so take credit for all of your good work. Detail every positive contribution in the school or community, no matter how small, by individuals or groups, students and staff."

By May it is a nearly impossible task to recreate all the important events over the past nine months, so Coulter starts an annual report file at the beginning of each school year and adds material to it on a daily basis. "It is much easier to eliminate excess information than to create it just before the deadline." At the end of the year he sorts the entries by useful categories, such as by ensemble types or grade levels. Some information applies to the entire district. He reviews each event from the standpoint of whether it is a selling point for the program or an interesting detail for an administrator. There comes a point in all things, from concerts to reports, when less is more.

Before becoming enmeshed in details, consider what appearance the finished report should have. At an early stage think about how many photographs and charts to include and what size the report should be. One standard size is 8½ x 11 inches, which prints on an 11 x 17 sheet that yields four pages. If a smaller size would be more attractive to you, the cost of trimming the booklet a few inches is small. Deal in multiples of four pages, which are efficient to print and bind. It is impossible to have an odd number of pages, but a blank page is not all bad.

The quality and texture of paper matter to most readers. Flimsy paper is unattractive and connotes that the material is insignificant. Paper in light colors can be attractive and adds little to the cost of the project, but it will cost more to have the cover printed on heavier paper than the text. Members of the school board and the administration will be impressed if you are able to note in small print at the bottom of one page that the entire cost of the report was paid for by a band booster club or a parents' association, not tax money. The point of the whole exercise is to document that the community gets good value for money spent on the music program.

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With computers as common today as typewriters have been in the past, everyone can produce attractive type and design a pamphlet using a desktop publishing program, such as *Pagemaker* or *QuarkXPress*. The annual report on the music program should be graphically appealing: even the best information is worthless to someone who does not read it. Very wide lines of type are difficult to read. Magazines frequently use 2- or 3-inch column widths, often measured in picas (6 picas = 1 inch). Leave enough white space between columns and in the gutters so that the material does not look crammed together. The space between lines of type (the leading) should be at least a 1/2 point size larger than the font size.

The type size in this text is 11 point, and that is probably the most appropriate size for the main body of a report because it stands out nicely without looking obtrusive. Directors-turned-publishers should understand the difference between serif and sans-serif fonts: serif fonts have small lines at the bottom of many letters to guide the eye. Studies have shown that reading speed and comprehension are 30% better with serif typeface. This sentence is set in a sans-serif type font. Avoid using too many different sizes and fonts so the report has coherence.

Visual breaks, such as bold subheadings and white space, give the eye a break or draw it to a new section. White space separates ideas inconspicuously. On the enclosed report an extra half-space of leading between each bullet (•) entry adds space without creating gaps.

Pictures and graphs will appeal to more people than long lines of black type and can tell some stories better than words. When flipping through a magazine many people are drawn into an article by the photos or graphics. The same rule that pertains to typefaces applies to pictures: less is often more. A small number of photos showing only a few people is better than too many tiny photos or large ones of an entire ensemble. A photo of one or two students will enable readers to see their enthusiasm without a magnifying glass. Place photos so the dominant subject looks into the page, not off into space.

Pay attention to page balance. If the left page of a spread has a photo, a graph, and a boxed quote while the right page has only type, the left page will appear busy. Try to balance each page and spread. Attractive graphics will interest readers, but the core of any publication is its editorial substance. Write in simple, direct language to convey information of significance and interest, but have a meaningful message. Substance is everything.

Once you have designed an annual report that seems complete, Coulter suggests asking for comments from a variety of others, including an English teacher, a parent, and an administrator, before sending the report to the printer. These people will give objective opinions and may catch typographical errors or inaccuracies. They may surprise you by suggesting something basic that you have overlooked, such as including some quotes from parents and students about the music program.

The final step is to distribute the report; the board of education, administrators, parents, and local politicians are obvious choices. Coulter has expanded his distribution to include local service groups when he asks them for fundraising support and each visitor to the music department, including student teachers and guest artists. He even gives copies to realtors, who sometimes have clients looking for a community that has a strong music program. He uses the report to give background information for grant requests and finds that it is an internal tool that helps the staff to assess the program. Coulter said, "One of the report's greatest benefits has been to encourage communication within the music department."

Band directors should take the necessary steps to win support for their programs by educating the general public about their worth. As Benham pointed out when discussing how to deal with a threatened budget cut, "the real strength of your presentation may be the large number of concerned parents sitting in the audience. Their presence may persuade the school board to accept your position" ("Defending Music Programs," August 1991, p. 19). Well-publicized music programs are also well-supported. □

John Benham's Advice on Forestalling Budget Cuts

- The future of music is ensured when its study is not viewed as an extracurricular activity, but as a necessary part of the curriculum.
- Few school boards can resist the political pressure of hundreds of parents filling a meeting hall.
- Music teachers should explain how they teach and what are the benefits to students from music education. Everyone has taken algebra and knows what happens in that course, but the daily rehearsals to learn a composition and transferring musical values to students are a mystery to many school board members. It is your job to tell them.