



MUSIC

ADVOCACY

by:

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WITH PRECISE PLANNING, YOU
CAN AVOID COMMON STRATEGIC
ERRORS IN MUSIC ADVOCACY.

I have observed a variety of parent support groups for music throughout my consulting career and have noticed eight common mistakes made by well-meaning music advocates. While these strategic errors or misconceptions greatly limit the potential beneficial role of booster organizations, they can be corrected. All it takes is a commitment to reach out to others interested in our cause, some time to learn about the issues in your district, and a goal-oriented approach—in other words, all the elements of constructive, proactive music advocacy!

Strategic Error #1: Limiting Your Support Organization to a Single Local School, or a Single Curricular Component, or Even a Single Year

The typical music advocacy coalition tends to be limited to parents of students currently involved in one school's music programming, for example, Smithtown High School Band Booster's Club. Parents in a group such as this tend to concentrate on the needs in a single school or aspect of the music curriculum while losing sight of district-wide issues that may have negative effects on their children as they progress through the system. For example, what happens when your child, who loves to play clarinet in fourth grade, cannot continue making music in high school, because block scheduling has been adopted in a way that makes it impossible for her to continue taking band?

This shortsighted focus can create a lack of unified support for district-wide music programs and make members competitive and divisive, while losing sight of equal access for all students. Once infighting begins, your goals can become muddled and music becomes an easier target for elimination.

Unfortunately, music teachers often prefer the single site format because it seems easier and more convenient in the short term. Teachers who think this way may be operating out of fear and may want to discourage parents from interfering or micro-managing the whole program.

Solution: Invite parents in other schools to join with you to create a district-wide music coalition. Make sure you focus attention on all areas and levels of the music curriculum. Join your efforts with your music teachers' and others' in the community.

Plan a few years into the future, creating a system of support for music education that will last long after your own children graduate. Start the ball rolling toward creating a comprehensive vision for music education in your district. Remember: you can't strategize if you don't have a plan!

Strategic Error #2: Limiting Your Support Organization to Fundraising Activities

Music booster organizations are a favorite of school administrations and boards. They can be very effective at fundraising, raising additional "tax support" for the district. Unfortunately, overemphasis on fundraising (to the exclusion of other objectives) has three major disadvantages.

1. It weakens music programs as curricular entities, philosophically placing music in the same category as extracurricular activities, like athletics.
2. It provides motivation to the administration and school board to reduce the music budget accordingly.
3. It burns out parents. I have actually observed several districts in which parents were told they could continue the music program—but only if they raised all the money for it, including funding the teaching positions. In at least one program, the music teacher even suggested this idea! (His spouse was employed by the music boosters at a salary of \$40,000 per year.)

Solution: As a first step, coalition members need to know *why* they're raising funds. Education about music program policy issues and budgetary concerns should be a focus of your efforts. To preserve your integrity as a curricular and cocurricular entity, you should limit your fundraising to extracurricular components of the music program.

Strategic Error #3: Limiting Your Advocacy Activities to Music Teachers or Control by Music Teachers

Music teachers often prefer to handle advocacy efforts themselves. This may be because they sometimes see needing parent support as a sign of personal weakness. Teachers may also fear

reprisals if they anger the administration and board. In some cases, teachers have even been ordered not to involve the parents, or told their program wouldn't be cut if they cooperated with the administration. If advocacy is limited to teachers, the administration can simply order the teachers to be quiet, or be faced with job loss due to insubordination.

Solution: By law, local, state, and federal public education departments give the public the right and responsibility for educational advocacy. The legal voice of the school board is the most visible expression of this responsibility. Music advocacy, especially in times of impending cuts, must have broad community support to be most successful. Make sure parents, teachers, administrators, school board members, and, yes, even students are involved in your community's music advocacy efforts.

Strategic Error #4: Limiting Your Advocacy Efforts to Reactive Strategies

Limiting advocacy to reactive strategies may give the music coalition a public reputation as an adversarial voice of conflict. People with conflict avoidance personalities may steer clear of participation in music advocacy because of that. Being reactive, rather than proactive, means you'll always feel—and be—behind the eight ball.

Solution: Make sure your coalition stays on message and presents any issues in a non-confrontational, proactive way. Proactive strategies can help create and solidify a positive reputation for your organization, one that's collaborative, supportive, and cooperative. But, in order to be proactive, you've got to educate and inform coalition members about issues, potential threats to music program funding, staff changes, and other policy and decision-making concerns *before* music program cuts are on the table. Attend meetings, ask questions, learn to speak the language of the school board and administration, and keep your focus on building and maintaining a positive relationship.

Once you've developed a positive reputation, it's more difficult for a district to make cuts in music because they'll want to avoid offending your group. Your music coalition is simply a parent-community-teacher organization in support of music. Administrators are very aware of the need to maintain an ongoing, positive relationship with music coalitions. Remember: your music coalition is vital to them. Once a positive relationship is forged, your coalition may even be able to offer much-needed support for other proposals under district consideration.

Strategic Error #5: Procrastination

Procrastination is another form of reactive advocacy. Uninformed music advocates leave themselves no choice but to make their (often flimsy and definitely reactive) case in a moment of crisis, for instance, when they learn—too late—of a potential cut or change in music programming.

Solution: Get involved before your music programs are in crisis! Monitor information on a continual basis. Once again, it's important to attend school board meetings, get to know the decision-makers, and organize your coalition. But, more than that, your coalition's case for justifying music in the curriculum must always be ready, at least in the form of annual reports on the status of the music program.

In the presence of financial crisis or educational reform, you

must act immediately to make sure that students who want to participate in music are not negatively affected by any potential cut or change. Do *not* wait until after the referendum vote or final proposal for cuts or change to make your case. It may be too late!

Strategic Error #6: Suggesting Alternate Cuts or Compromise

No one from the music coalition or teaching staff should ever make any suggestion for alternate cuts or compromise. If you do, they will be immediately accepted, and then you become responsible for them! Worse, those cuts very likely will just be added to the list of other cuts proposed. And never suggest cuts in another area of the curriculum. Leave all those decisions up to the administration and board. You are not responsible to provide them with the solution, only advocating for the music program.

Solution: You must learn to develop impact statements that demonstrate the anticipated short- and long-term results. In other words, "if the district takes the (specified) action, the following will happen to the music program."

Strategic Error #7: Becoming Involved in a Battle of Music Versus Athletics

Flag on the field—this is a huge mistake! It identifies you with those who philosophically characterize the music program as extracurricular.

Solution: Politely, but firmly, refuse to engage in this type of exchange. Keep your focus on music as curricular and cocurricular (vs. extracurricular), and on the importance of music within the school curriculum. Resist the temptation to compare and contrast what really amounts to comparing apples and oranges. Some like music, others prefer sports, but both have high value to students. Further, many music students will also participate in athletics.

Strategic Error #8: Resorting to Personal Attacks

Personal attacks are a desperate strategy of last resort and a glaring sign of weakness in your case. Worse, such tactics tend to establish revenge cycles that place the music curriculum on an annual cycle for continued attacks.

Solution: Make a commitment to *not* use name-calling, threats, or calls for resignations in your interactions with school board members, teachers, or school administrators, even in response to those who may attack you. Instead, take the high road and keep your focus on the issues at hand and the needs of the students. If you see that music programs are in danger of being reduced or eliminated, study the issues, offer your help in problem-solving discussions, and present reasonable, student-centered solutions and suggestions.

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