

Defending Music Programs With Economic Analysis

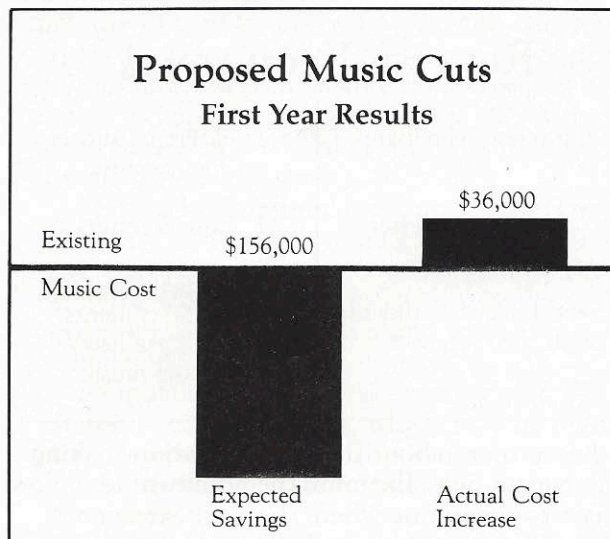
by John Benham

When school districts face economic crises, music programs are often the first items struck from budgets. In California, for instance, the number of music students has dropped from 124,000 to 64,000. Where music programs have been cut, however, economic crisis has often remained. Cuts in music budgets created the illusion of saving money, but the students previously in music groups were shifted to smaller classes. While a band or orchestra director may teach 75 students in a class period, other teachers generally have fewer. If instrumental music classes are cut, even more teachers will be needed to supervise the 75 students in other classes. The ultimate cost of cutting music department budgets is more than that of maintaining the programs. This principle, known as reverse economics, is unfamiliar to most administrators.

Many cuts occur in the elementary grades because most programs for beginners pull students out of their regular class. Administrators know that if they cut an elementary school teacher, there is a classroom instructor able to teach the affected students. They do not understand that if elementary school music programs are eliminated or significantly changed, junior and senior high school music enrollment will drop by a minimum of 65%.

In one school district, administrators wanted to save \$156,000. They argued that to reduce their budget they could cut five music teachers. They didn't anticipate what would happen to the students eliminated from music classes or the reverse economic effect. There were 2,529 instru-

mental music students in this school district. As a result of program cuts in fifth and sixth grades and additional cuts at the secondary level, music enrollment would have dropped to 736. The district would have needed to add 29 new classes and hire more than six teachers for them. We pointed out that instead of the \$156,000 the schools thought they were going to save the first year, they would spend \$192,000 in hiring new teachers for a net cost increase of \$36,000. By the time those elementary school students proposed to be eliminated from music classes would reach high school, more than twelve teachers would have been added to replace the initial five cut, at a cost of \$378,000. The administration reversed the cut. Many school district budgets have 10,000 separate line items. Most administrators would not examine each one and might assume that all teachers carry an equal student load. Those involved with school music should demonstrate that cutting music costs more than it saves.



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The prospect of school music cuts has forced teachers and parents to organize and protect programs. The place to begin organizing is in the music department. Avoiding cuts is not merely a band or choir issue but affects the entire music department. If teachers within the same depart-

ment cannot unify, they will not develop community support. Programs are eliminated when no one is willing to organize, or if the music faculty is divided over which classes should be preserved. Administrators sometimes use the divide and conquer method, asking each teacher which cut in the department would cause the least damage. Obviously, a band director will not suggest a cut in the band program. If the administrator can generate enough disagreement within the department, he can make the cuts without opposition. After the music department is unified, organize parents of music students and concerned members of the community. Those who pay taxes for public education are entitled to oppose changes in curriculum. Parents of music students pay additional expenses beyond their tax bills for instruments and private lessons. When the budget ax threatens to fall on music programs, rally parents to oppose such changes.

To reverse threatened budget cuts, more than a band booster club is necessary. Develop a detailed contingency plan to mobilize parents and the community if the threat of reductions in music programs arises. Enlist the help of parents and community members who are recognized as advocates of the district's entire educational program; work with them to document an integrated philosophy and curriculum for the music program. Include specific, achievable, and measurable goals, not for the department but for the students. File this plan with the central administration. If the district has a written educational philosophy, the music philosophy should be similar. These steps help establish music as an integral part of the school day, not an extra-curricular activity.

Reverse Economics

If a school eliminates

3 music teachers

who have 200 students each (600 total)

School district suffers a net loss because

4 new teachers

with normal class load of 150 students (600 total) are needed after cutting music

Learn more about the administration making the budget cuts. Examine the administrative flow chart to determine where the buck stops and find out what subjective beliefs may color any decision. Are budget choices based on the educational background or experience of specific administrators? While an administrator may seem to oppose music programs, it is more likely that tough decisions are based on tradition or educational philosophy. In addition to persuading administrators, support the school board and

stay attuned to its decisions. Board approval may seem to be merely a rubber stamp for administrators, but these part-time public servants who work outside the schools are probably the people most concerned with student needs. A carefully organized proposal coupled with unified parents and teachers can help reverse cuts.

While advance preparation to maintain programs is desirable, frequently a teacher hears of a position or program cut after the fact. A consultant can help teachers reverse these decisions because teachers who lead efforts by themselves appear primarily concerned with saving their own jobs. Parents are also unsuited to fight cuts because they have little understanding of educational jargon or administrative techniques employed to make cuts and balance budgets. A consultant, however, should not make direct appeals to the school board because as an outsider, his views may not be heeded. The proper role of an outside consultant is training parents and teachers to lead the fight and prepare their proposal.

The first step in reversing cuts is gathering and interpreting the economic information behind the reduction. Administrative reports generally include figures justifying increased tax levy referendums or program cuts. Do not accept the data as fact or the cuts as inevitable. Learn to challenge every piece of information from the perspective of trying to save school music.

Examine the administration's assumptions in determining cuts. Many schools support the notion that fewer services performed well are preferable to many services performed less well. Parents and teachers should demonstrate that music is a part of the curriculum performed effectively and that cost comparison supports maintaining the program. Many cuts are based on cost/benefit ratios, with expensive programs affecting few students being the first eliminated. In one school district the orchestra program was targeted for cuts, but when the music parents association examined the administration's information, they found that music was considered less important than some traditional courses but outranked several academic subjects and all athletic activities based on established criteria. A program might be saved if the music organization demonstrates that school music coincides with a district's educational philosophy more than other areas.

Music serves education in ways not recognized by many people making budget decisions. Music requires extensive mathematical understanding, advanced social and communications skills, teamwork, and artistic creativity; every student who comes through a music program learns a foreign language. Music teachers should educate school boards and administrators about the economic and the educational benefits from school music programs.



One obstacle to gathering information from the administration is the budget language. Education has a distinct terminology, confusing to outsiders. Groups attempting to stop cuts should understand these terms to be effective. The educators include the following:

Average: when administrators use the word average to define teacher salaries and class sizes, they demonstrate an unwillingness to examine how each program affects students. The need to pass a complex budget with thousands of line items leaves little time to go beyond averages.

Curricular: parents and teachers should stress that music is not extracurricular. No matter how administrators try to alter its meaning, curricular refers to any class which is held during a normal school day. Cutting a course from the curriculum creates a void in the schedule.

Cocurricular: activities in connection with class, such as concerts, which might be held outside the school, cocurricular activities are part of teachers' regular responsibilities and salaries.

Extracurricular: this describes activities or classes held outside the school day and includes marching or pep bands, which may be considered by some as entertainment or public relations.

State guidelines or administrators may have different legal definitions for curricular, cocurricular, and extracurricular activities; but these definitions are sufficient to draft proposals.

Administrators often use confusing euphemisms for simple terms; the purpose may be to impress the listener, to confuse the listener, or simply out of habit. When referring to the number of students, administrators sometimes refer to a pupil unit or P.U., which is equal to one student. P.S.R. refers to the pupil/staff ratio (including the non-teaching staff); school boards establish ratios of students to faculty by dividing the number of full-time students by the number of full-time faculty. This S.F.R. is invariably larger than the ratio including the entire teaching and non-teaching staff for the same school.

In addition to confusing terms, administrators use several techniques to reduce opposition to cuts. They frequently claim enrollment declines, but while there are fewer students, this does not mean music programs are losing members. It is crucial for music teachers to demonstrate that the department continues to thrive. Administrators also use unfair deadlines to prevent challenges to cuts made without advance notice or sufficient time for any effort to save the program. Another method, sometimes described in educator jargon as schedule impacting, is to alter student, room, or teacher schedules to preclude the scheduling of music programs.

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Perhaps the most deadly administrator technique is the budget game, which administrators may use to confuse everyone else with complex jargon describing how money moves through the school budget. Teachers and parents will be unable to counter proposed budget cuts if they fail to understand the labyrinth of budget terms, of which these are some:

State aid is appropriated money given by the state to a branch of its government.

Categorical aid includes funds paid by the state to school districts for such specific purposes as transportation and special education.

Foundation aid comprises money paid by states to school districts, which may be used for operating expenses. The structure of this fund varies from state to state and changes frequently.

Capital outlay funds refer to expenditures in adding or improving equipment, buildings, and sites.

Community services funds support recreational and educational activities for school district residents.

Debt service funds help retire bonds used to fund building construction.

The general fund, which consists of all money not accounted for otherwise, frequently affects program cuts. Sometimes an area of the budget holds money beyond its liabilities and reserves; these dollars are called the fund balance. When this money is assigned, it is named appropriated fund balance. School districts seeking to increase revenues sometimes hold a bond referendum to raise taxes for building construction, or a levy referendum, which is a vote to increase taxes for the general operating fund. If you do not understand the jargon of school budgets, the board will not be swayed by your economic arguments.

“As you learn the concept of reverse economics you will come to understand, as I do, that money is not saved by cutting music programs.”

— Burton M. Nygren, Superintendent,
Moundsview (Minn.), Public Schools

Perhaps nothing is more dangerous to school music programs than hidden cuts which do not appear to affect music budgets. The district may decide to cut the entire budget by a certain amount; the problem for music programs is that they frequently have more line items than other areas of the curriculum. While it may seem the district has cut each area equally by making cuts in every item of the budget, a music department with four line items could have four times as much cut from its programs.

Sometimes hidden cuts occur in areas that seem unrelated to music, but a cut in summer school programs may affect beginning instrumental lessons; if secretarial positions are eliminated, this could affect the music department. Changes in elementary staffs may reduce beginning choral and instrumental programs that in a few years will sharply reduce music enrollment in higher grades.

Once your music committee understands the terms in each budget and how administrators manipulate them, form committees to divide responsibilities; establish good communication between members, which may mean devising telephone calling chains or writing a newsletter; create an administrative liaison committee; and discover who on the school board and in the administration is sympathetic to your cause and will advance your proposal or advise you of developments. It is important to analyze all information related to saving music programs and to work with administrators and board members to ensure the accuracy of the information. Analyze your facts carefully to give a proposal a better chance of success.

The proposal should demonstrate how school music saves taxpayers' money. Proclaim your desire to preserve the integrity of individual programs and save teachers; show how music

accomplishes these goals more effectively than other programs. The financial reality is that extracurricular programs and those with the lowest student-faculty ratios are the most expensive, and this provides a basis from which to counter proposed cuts. Illustrate how enrollment plummets in junior and senior high school music classes when elementary-level programs are cut.

Your proposal is in a better economic position if music teachers in the district carry student loads equal to or greater than those of other classroom teachers. If music teachers have the same class loads as other teachers, the music department should bear only a fair share of the cuts. If the music department has a lower student load than the other departments, it is fair to point out why this is the case and what changes (in scheduling, for example) would allow the program to grow to the standards generally found throughout the country. By allowing the music programs to grow, a school board could effect a financial savings. When a cut is proposed in elementary school music programs, the result could be more harmful than modest cuts throughout all grade levels.

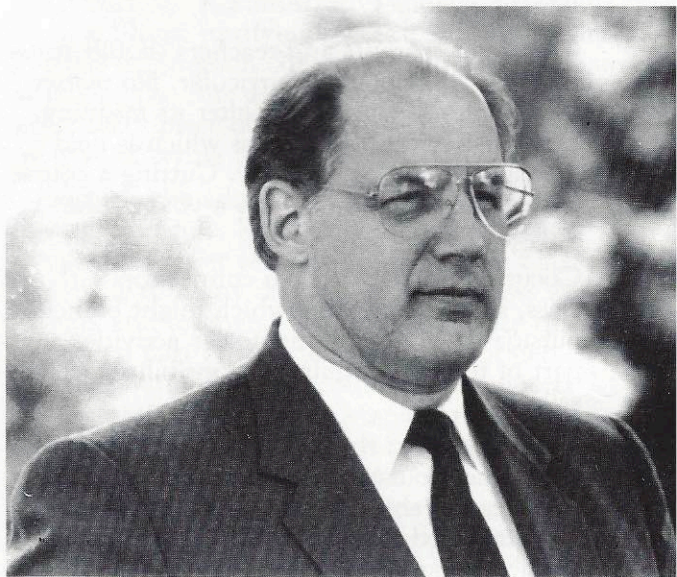


Chart the effects of cutting music teachers on the resulting need to hire regular classroom teachers to replace them. The only programs more cost-effective than music are study halls, which serve no educational purpose.

There are other points to consider in a proposal:

- Enrollment loss statistics should be conservative in showing the reduction of the size of the instrumental music program.
- The loss of good teachers is permanent, even if the positions are restored in subsequent years.
- Parents currently subsidize the instrumental music program with the purchase and maintenance of instruments for their own children.
- With the high student loads of instrumental music teachers it may be appropriate to hire additional staff to give them equitable loads.

- Why lay off teachers from an economically sound program when it will become necessary to replace them with additional teachers in smaller classes?

- Who is responsible to select the students who will remain in the program, and on what basis?

Once the proposal is complete, music teachers and friendly administrators should examine it for inaccuracies or assumptions. After refining the proposal, duplicate and present the document in meetings with individual administrators; avoid confrontation by simply presenting facts related to the district's efforts to save money. Your purpose is not to embarrass the administration but only to demonstrate that the music program supports the administrative position on saving money.

“The most deadly administrator technique is the budget game, which administrators may use to confuse everyone else . . .”

The committee should meet with individual school board members, beginning with friendly ones, who may point out weaknesses in the proposal. A committee of two or three should present the proposal to administrators or the school board, reviewing the proposal, asking for observations, and promising to return should additional information be requested. The objective is winning the battle without public confrontation or embarrassment to administrators or board members. If private negotiations fail, you have laid the groundwork for requesting a hearing on the school board calendar.

Administrators often use public board meetings as a tactic to reduce their political liability for decisions. Follow protocol and urge all music parents to attend the meeting. Though your proposal contains effective economic arguments, 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. Ask parents to arrive 30-45 minutes before the meeting so you may share the essential elements of your presentation with them. Pass out music parent identity badges of some type, and tell parents the committee requests they not speak or express vocal support or opposition to statements made at the meeting. Make sure the spokesman is in a location that allows conversation with other committee members or teachers without disruption or the appearance of being uninformed. Be courteous to the board and listen carefully to questions and responses; be sure you understand statements completely before answering. Remember, the strength of your case is in the proposal, and the

people attending are there to show support and voting power and to display unified concern for student-centered decisions.

Even if the proposal is successful, the battle to sustain programs has only begun. Some administrators try to effect hidden cuts through school principals' decisions that will ultimately undermine music. These attempts take several forms, including confusing the registration process by scheduling student conflicts with music classes. It may involve pressure to take other courses, scheduling important classes in conflict with select music groups, changing graduation requirements, or reducing the number of classes students can take in a day.

Administrators may also schedule music rooms for other academic classes on the basis of space needs. They might force all music groups to rehearse in the same room or move music performance to the extracurricular category of classes outside the school day. These problems can be compounded by time delays, where an administrator does not inform you until student registration is complete and effects cannot be reversed. At one school, music programs were excluded from registration materials, which caused students to think the class was not offered. After the proposal is presented, stay informed and in contact with music teachers to make sure hidden cuts and administrative techniques do not circumvent the school board's decision.

Additional rental fees may be suggested to pay the cost of a music program. Remind the administration that parents already subsidize the program through the purchase and maintenance of musical instruments. One final technique is an alteration of music teachers' student loads. Beware of the administration that discovers how economical the music program is and tries to increase the load on music teachers even further.

Strive to preserve program integrity at all costs. Remember it is best to organize before the process begins, though most teachers and parents wait until they are under pressure of a deadline. Organize now, maintain adequate records, and be prepared.

The most important issue is preserving musical opportunities for students. Balancing budgets and cutting programs serve adult needs; participating in music programs benefits the students. Make sure administrators understand that music has intrinsic value throughout each student's lifetime. The future of music is ensured when its study is not viewed as an extracurricular activity, but as a necessary part of the curriculum. □

John Benham's full-length manuscript on this subject is available for \$11.95 (first class postage included) from Music in World Cultures, Inc., 1507 Knoll Drive, Shoreview, Minnesota (612) 783-0902, or directors may call about problems or workshops.