

54th triennial National Convention Meeting Our Speakers

Dr. John L. Benham, *Music advocate*



With nearly 40 years experience as a music educator, including 6 years as a school board member, Dr. John Benham first became involved in saving school music programs in 1981. Since then he has worked with over 400 school districts, taking his message to nearly every state and province in North America.

His theory of “reverse economics” demonstrates the financial viability of a strong music program. To date, the methods he uses to equip and mobilize community music coalitions are responsible for preventing and restoring over \$71 million in reductions to music programs, and saving over 2,000 teaching positions that provide instruction to over 500,000 students.

What follows is an account of two school districts. The names of the two counties are fictitious; however, the two cases are real, and occurred simultaneously in separate states. All data is extracted from the records of the Status Reports composed by Benham, who served as consultant to both districts. Within the stories of these two districts is the distillation of much of Benham’s work. One district did many things “right” and saved its music program. The other district is just as instructive, but for the opposite reason. They made too many “wrong” decisions during the process, and the results to their program were reflective of those decisions.

It’s our hope that this is the jumping-off point for many Sinfonians who are music educators or simply interested in music education. The ideas and practices espoused by Benham are not things that only educators or administrators can do; they are for everyone who cares about music.

A TALE OF TWO COUNTIES

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There are five keys to successful advocacy for music education:

- Understanding the School System
- A Well-organized Music Coalition
- A Unified Music Profession
- Understanding the Decision-making Process
- Proactive Involvement in the Process

It was spring of the year, a time when school districts take what seems to have become an annual trek down the budget cut lane. Two counties, far apart get the news: *budget deficit...cuts pending...music at the top of the list!*

The Districts:

Foresight County, the twelfth largest district in the United States, has an enrollment of 172,000 students. Demographics indicate both economic and ethnic diversity. The administration has determined that the impending deficit to be \$315.6 million.

Failure County, also a large urban school district, has an enrollment of 86,500 students. Demographically the district is ethnically and economically diverse, with an obvious division into two distinct areas based on those factors. While the district has been unable to determine a more specific figure, it projects that the deficit will be in the neighborhood of \$100-137 million.

The Music Program

Considered a national model of musical excellence, Foresight County Schools have a music curriculum that extends through all grades,

with its choral and instrumental programs based on the foundation of a general music education in the elementary grades. General music options continue at the secondary level with courses such as music theory. Students have the option to participate in beginning band and orchestra in grades four through six. Students are “pulled out” of the classroom for elementary instrumental instruction. There are 25,000 students that participate in the elementary instrumental music program.

The music program in Failure County is recognized for an extensive curriculum, similar to Foresight County in many ways, with two major differences.

1. Instrumental music (band and orchestra) instruction is available in grades four and five. Students in grade six are part of a middle school configuration.
2. The highest concentration of enrollment in music performance is in half of the district with the least ethnic diversity and the highest economic level.

Students are “pulled out” of the classroom for elementary instrumental instruction. There are 8,500 students participating.

The Administrative Proposal

The Foresight district *administration* proposed the elimination of the entire elementary instrumental curriculum, with the projected loss of 117 full-time equivalent (FTE) teaching positions, plus hidden cuts. Hidden cuts are reductions to the music program in budget line items that may include music, but do not specifically name them, such as increasing class sizes or mandating a minimum enrollment for each music class.

In Failure County, the *music coordinator* recommended eliminating the elementary instrumental curriculum. As a choral director he suggested to the administration that the potential loss of enrollment in instrumental music will be recovered by recruiting those students into the choral programs at the secondary level. This position was an obvious factor of division among the music faculty. As a means of avoiding potential political fallout, the *administration* proposes outsourcing the program to a music store and making it an after school program. Adoption of the proposal would result in the minimum elimination of 59 FTE instrumental teachers. Upon further research, it is discovered that the administration has determined to increase music class sizes (hidden cuts) by establishing a minimum enrollment of 40 students in each music class. This would eliminate all secondary general music classes, and any music performance class such as advanced ensembles. An additional 7-10 FTE positions would be eliminated.

The fact that the music coordinator suggested the cuts created immense division in Failure County. Being unified and able to speak with one voice with faculty, parents, and community members is of paramount importance. As we'll see, the proposed cuts themselves can not only fail to save money, but also have the potential to cost the district money in the long run. But without a unity of voice this point can never be made.

The Music Coalition

A well-organized Music Coalition had been in place for several years in Foresight County. All schools and areas of the music curriculum are represented. Aware that the music program was once again under threat, they began their *proactive* efforts at saving the program months before the final decision was to be made. The coalition included members of the community, including the music industry and arts advocates who did not have children in school. Attendance at advocacy meetings was excellent, and media coverage of during the entire process was extensive.



There was no music coalition in Failure County, even though this is not the first time the district has proposed cuts to the music program. There are a couple of schools that have band booster organizations, but no district-wide structure or representation. Three public meetings were held and media coverage was excellent. However, only about 100 different individuals attended, even though over 60 teaching positions were in jeopardy.

The entire process in Failure County was *reactive*. Parents were unable to any provide significant input on the process, and in fact were unable to acquire the statistical data required to do a Status Report until they threatened legal action.

The Teachers

While not all Foresight County teachers actively participated in the advocacy process, they were unified in its support to the extent that no one undermined the efforts of the coalition.

Few Failure County teachers participated in the process. While many were in a state of denial, others exhibited a sense of helplessness. The testimony of many teachers affirmed that they had been told by the administration that if they participated in the process their jobs would be cut. This, of course, is illegal.

This highlights the need for a proactive approach by having an advocacy system in place *before* the storm hits. The teachers and

community members of Failure County did not have an opportunity to even gather all relevant information. They were left misinformed, disillusioned, and helpless to act.

Reverse Economics

The concept of *Reverse Economics* lies in the principle that the long-term effects of the elimination or reduction of a program are more costly than the initial savings anticipated. There are at least two relevant factors that contribute to the concept.

1. The budget process in education is based on the assumption of an average salary of all teachers (FTE); and that each teacher (FTE) has the same average student load. The primary cost factor in education is personnel. The most cost-efficient personnel are those who provide instruction to the largest number of students in a given class period and/or who carry the largest student loads. Since music performance teachers normally carry the largest student loads, or have the largest average class sizes, in effect they have a higher FTE value than the classroom teacher. Typically the secondary music performance (band, orchestra, choir) teacher has a student load of 200 compared with the classroom teacher with average loads of 125. This gives the music performance teacher an FTE value equivalent to 1.6 FTE classroom teachers. In other words, for every 1.0 FTE music teacher eliminated or lost because of declining enrollment, the district will need to hire 1.6 FTE classroom teachers.

2. Extensive national case studies indicate that when the first year of beginning instrumental instruction is delayed until grade six (or later), the subsequent decline in student participation in the secondary grades will be a minimum of 65%. The resulting decline of secondary enrollment in music will result in the significant increase in class sizes for non-music subjects, requiring the district to hire teachers to keep non-music class sizes down.

In essence, having a music program that begins at an early grade is a great way to create long-term savings for a district. By creating a large, sustained

music program, you create larger class sizes for each music teacher, thus saving the district money in replacement cost if the music program didn't exist. This is a powerful economic factor in music programs that is often overlooked.

The Data

The average student load of the secondary classroom teachers in Foresight County was 132 in the middle school and 145 in the high school. Compared, respectively, with the average student loads of 198 and 178 for the music performance teachers, the music teachers had an FTE value of 1.5 FTE classroom teachers.

Combined with the desire to maintain current class sizes at the secondary level and the need to add classes because of the anticipated decline of enrollment in instrumental music, the district would have needed to hire an additional 70 teachers. This would have resulted in budgetary miscalculation equivalent to an annual loss (reverse economic effect) of over \$900,000.

The average student load of the secondary classroom teacher in Failure County was 78 in the middle school and 60 in the high school. Compared with the average student load of 177 for the secondary music performance teacher, the music teachers had an FTE value of 2.4 FTE in the middle school and 3.0 FTE in the high school.

Combined with the desire to maintain current class sizes at the secondary level and the need to add classes because of the anticipated loss of enrollment in instrumental music, the district would have needed to hire an additional 122 teachers. This would have resulted in budgetary miscalculation equivalent to an annual loss of over \$10,000,000.

Both districts stood to lose more than they could ever hope to save by cutting music programs and classes. Even if the district allowed average class sizes to go up slightly after the cuts, the net effect would be economically detrimental.

The Decision and the Results

Working collaboratively and proactively, the decision was made to save the program in Foresight

County. The curriculum remained intact and students were allowed to continue participation. Working from an adversarial and reactive perspective, the decision to outsource the elementary instrumental curriculum was adopted by the Failure County school board on the same night that the Status Report was to be presented by the parents. Between the spring of the decision year and the implementation of the after school program the next fall, student enrollment dropped from 8,500 to 7,650, a loss of 10% of the enrollment.

The Lesson

As we strive to save, restore and build music education programs for students in American public schools, here are some key action points:

- Establish a music coalition representing all schools, all levels and all areas of the music curriculum. Remember to involve the community at large.
- Work for the unity of the music teachers; collaboration, not competition.
- Get involved in the process. Have at least one representative at each board meeting.
- Gather data on the music program, using it to present an annual Status Report to the board and administration. If necessary, get consultant assistance.
- Do it now! 

*Dr. Benham will be at this summer's National Convention to present on his work. The ideas and themes discussed in this article will be expanded upon, and new concepts and strategies will be added, to give all musicians the tools needed to become active advocates in their communities. For those unable to attend Convention, but who wish to learn more about this type of music advocacy, Benham's book, *Music Advocacy: Moving from Survival to Vision*, co-published by the National Association for Music Education and Rowman & Littlefield Education, is available from a variety of popular booksellers.*