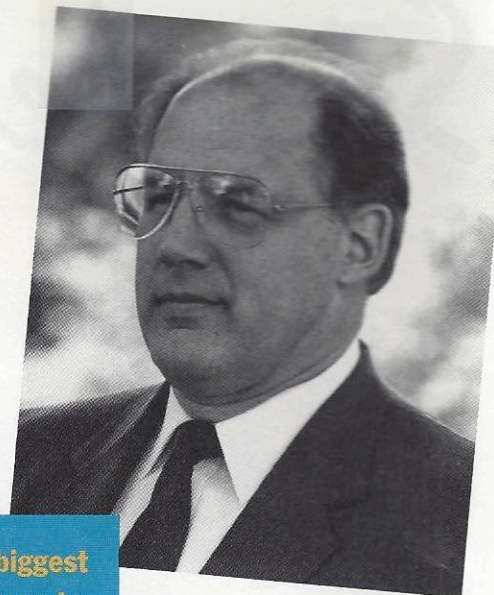


Dr. John Benham Saving Music Education, One School at a Time



Picking up the phone to summons John Benham can only be compared to the educational version of Commissioner Gordon picking up the Bat-phone. As trite a comparison as this may sound, ask any one of the school band or orchestra directors whose program he's saved, and they'll tell you the story of how their music, not to mention their jobs, were brought back from the brink of elimination.

Dr. John Benham, founder of Music In World Cultures, Inc. has been a school music advocate for nearly two decades. As familiar a name to music educators as Dr. Tim Lautzenheiser, the two have often worked in conjunction, promoting the importance of music in the development of children. On his own, however, Benham balances his time between teaching Ethnomusicology in his home state of Minnesota, traveling back and forth to Indonesia to transcribe the music of its indigenous primitive cultures, and saving desperate music directors from their budget-slashing administrators. *SBO* had a rare opportunity to question to Dr. Benham at this year's MidWest Band & Orchestra Clinic about his advocacy program. The following are his responses:

SBO: How did you get started in school music advocacy?

Benham: In 1981, I moved my family into a school district in Minnesota that

we picked specifically for its music program. A week later, the school proposed cutting up to 70 percent of its instrumental music staff. I subsequently got involved with the parent's committee, which is where I came up with this whole series of economic and statistical analyses. The school said it was going to save \$100,000 a year by cutting music. I went into the school district and demonstrated statistically, beyond any doubt, that what they thought was going to save them \$100,000 was going to end up costing them \$200,000 annually. The parents' group and I ended up saving the entire music program with my economic analysis. From there, everything spread by word-of-mouth, and I ended up doing a presentation of my analysis at the Minnesota Music Educator's Conference. The industry soon became aware of it, and started funding it. I established my company, Music in World Cultures, Inc., soon after that.

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SBO: What is the basic function of Music in World Cultures?

Benham: What we do is crisis intervention work at school districts, particularly working with music programs

that are being cut for one reason or another. I go into a school district and do various tasks from politically organizing music booster groups to complete analysis of the music programs. There is always a specific process I go through, and the process begins by giving out a three-page survey that gives me all the information I need to profile the district, including average class size, number of students, and enrollment in the district by grade. Then I compare the music enrollment related to those figures.

SBO: How do you formulate these figures?

Benham: To over-simplify, let's take a band teacher who has 50 students, and the district loses that band director's position because the feeder system has been eliminated. These 50 kids are now going to have to be placed in another class. The other class, however, is only going to take 25 students so they now have to hire two teachers to replace that one music teacher. That's a gross over-simplification, because the whole statistical process is much greater than that. When I go into a school district, the normal statistical analysis report that I write will be up to 40 pages long. Included in the report is an introduction on why

music is important for the kids, followed by an analysis of the administrative proposal. I'll also analyze the music program from core perspectives: what are the faculty issues, curricular issues, students participation, and finally economic impacts of the recommendations of the administration's proposal.

SBO: What are the major issues that you've gone up against?

Benham: In 1981, the primary issues were budget cuts. Now I deal more with school reform and restructure of education, which includes block-scheduling. The biggest scare I've ever seen, though, is the new School-to-Work program, which mandates career choices for students in eighth grade. The students have to select their career path at this point, and choose a career cluster of classes. Then when they finish high school, they go right into working within that field. What it really comes down to is taxpayer-funded job training for big business. It's part of Hillary Clinton's Goals 2000. Politicians buy into it also because it's a way to get rid of welfare. It's already been passed in West Virginia, and other states are considering it as well.

SBO: How does it trickle down?

Benham: A student makes a choice in eighth grade toward a career cluster, and if participating in band, orchestra or choir isn't part of that career cluster, good-bye music. The intent behind the program may be good, which is wanting every kid that gets out of school to be able to work. But when they implement it, they don't consider what the long term effects are. No kid is going to be able to make his/her career choice in eighth grade. How many people are working today according to whatever they decided in junior high school? On the one side you have school guidance counselors telling kids they have to prepare for six to eight career changes in their lifetime, yet if they choose a career cluster in school, what are they going to do when the job-market changes? It's terrifying.

SBO: Who funds you?

Benham: There are three ways I get my funding. We ask the local music dealer to kick in an unspecified voluntary amount,

then when we go into the district, we go through a certain process. We take the survey and construct the profile first so we can write the report. Second, we meet with all the teachers, decide with them what all the issues are, and define the problem. We then meet with the parents and anybody else from the community who wants to participate, and show them that the school district is theirs. They own it, they pay for it, and they have the right and responsibility to take control of it. After this we pass around a hat, and the reason for this is not only to collect money, but because if they give a buck, we'll know that they'll continue to be involved in the process. We write the report, give it to them, select and train the leadership team and let them take on their administration. The costs not provided by these sources has been funded by the National Association of Band Instrument Manufacturers' Superfund. However, this funding is in the process of being phased out by the industry.

SBO: So you don't personally meet with a school's administration?

Benham: No. Administrators would look at me and ask, "Do you live here?", and when I say that I didn't they would ask me to leave. They're not going to listen to me.

SBO: How busy are you?

Benham: 1998 has been our busiest year, but it's not due to budget cuts. The biggest issue now is schools that are restructuring their education curriculum. I've never calculated how many schools I work with annually, but I'd say anywhere from 20 to 50 schools a year.

SBO: What's your success rate?

Benham: Somewhere in the neighborhood of 98 percent.

SBO: With a success rate that impressive, why doesn't every school that has program threats call you?

Benham: I think there's a certain percentage of the music education profession that is afraid to take action. One excuse I'll hear is, "We don't want to upset anybody in the administration."

Well, what difference does it make if they're going to cut you? It's not whether you and the administration have a problem, it's are the kids going to have a program. The other big issue is that many instrumental music directors, and I speak as one of them, really have a certain feeling of divine power; to bring somebody else in is a sign of our weakness. We'd rather see the program cut than invite

in an outsider. I've had band teachers that have called me as many as four years in a row, getting cuts after cuts. I say to them, "Why don't you just let me come down and do your report and train your parents and get this over with", and they'll insist that they're going to be okay. Then they'll call me the following year and tell me that they just lost the fifth grade, but everything will be okay. What that tells me is that their definition of 'okay' simply means that they still have their job.

"Directors never invite a superintendent to a first rehearsal... They only see the concert."

SBO: What are some common misunderstandings about the economics of a band program?

Benham: People, meaning directors, administrators and the community, generally don't understand how the budgetary process works. As soon as you sit down and with them and say, "your band teacher has 50 kids in her class, what are you going to do with them when you

cut it?" They'll say, "I never thought of that," because they're dealing with a system of averages. I was on a school board for six years, and it was the best education I ever had, because now I know how administrators are thinking. All I needed to prove my case to them was to show how their budget works, and show them the fallacious aspects of their budgetary process and how it's going to kill them if they cut the music program. The budget process is so complex — with up to 10,000 line-items — and they're always under-staffed. Districts usually

have only one business person figuring all this out; they don't have time to figure out each line-item, so they set up a system of averages.

As far as the administrators themselves, their biggest misunderstanding is that they don't understand the importance of music. They are convinced that music is primarily extra-curricular. Administrators never see music educators doing anything other than performing, marching, or doing some other sort of PR or fundraising activity. Directors never invite a superintendent to a first rehearsal — they only see the concert. Because of that, they think we wave a stick and the music just happens. They don't understand the process. Bring a principal into the first rehearsal, and then bring him to a concert, and he'll be absolutely amazed, and you'll gain a whole new respect.

SBO: What do you see as the biggest threats to the future of music education?

Benham: Middle school has continued to be threatened by six-week explor-

atory classes rather than a year-round course — General Music in particular. The other threat that comes with that is they'll make the middle school start in sixth grade, cutting out the fifth grade program entirely.

Tax vouchers are another threat. This is a system where the government says to a parent, "We'll give you a \$2,500 tax credit to go to the school of your choice." The ideas here is to provide for open enrollment and to create a competition between the schools to provide for educational accountability. How many people can afford to go to a private school with a tax voucher that is only \$2,500? So what ends up happening is there becomes a polarization of social classes. Worse, the school district loses all \$7,000 that would normally have gone to that student to support his/her education, even though the student only gets \$2,500. Theoretically, for every student that can be convinced to leave the public schools, the government saves \$4,500. The motivation is more than open enrollment.

Then there's block scheduling, the

four period day that theoretically gives kids more educational electives because they can take eight courses a year. What we're finding now is districts that have gone to block are defeating the principle by adding extra required courses. For example, where as algebra 1 and 2 used to be offered as required courses, now they have to add an algebra 3 because they're finding they can't get through all the material. Block-scheduling has less minutes per course than traditional systems. Block-scheduling is not just a music issue, but a general issue for the entire curriculum. For the 60 years that block scheduling has been in existence, there's not one piece of scientific evidence supporting that it has improved a student's

education. In fact, just this year, ACT and AP came out with results from their tests, and they found that those states that have the highest amount of block scheduling are at the bottom of the testing scale, and those states that have the lowest amount of block scheduling are the top scoring 10 states. Both ACT and the AP testing organizations are calling

for a re-examination of the block scheduling concept.

Finally, and the one that scares me the most, is this school-to-work thing. The student here spends 100 hours of an internship working for a company for free, but the school district is responsible for legal issues such as Workman's Compensation.

SBO: What are a few things a music director can do to raise music awareness and support in their communities?

Benham: The first thing would regard their curriculum. They should have a program that meets the specific requirements of a good curriculum, which has sequential, written objectives stated as student outcomes. In other words, when the student finishes this class, they should be able to do x, y and z. These outcomes have to be stated in a way that meets three characteristics: they're specific, they're achievable, and they're measurable. If I say a student should finish the sixth grade and be able to read music, this is certainly achievable, but

not specific or measurable. But if I were to say a sixth grade student ought to be able to read 4/4, 2/4, and 3/4 time including rhythms of a whole note, a dotted-half note, a half note, quarter notes and eighth notes, and then set up a system to measure that, then I can determine whether they've accomplished this. Now I have a specific agenda that I can demonstrate to teachers and parents that the kids are learning. Almost every district I go into lacks doesn't have anything in writing they can use to demonstrate to an administrator or the public what they're accomplishing. Therefore, people won't think they're accomplishing anything. It's very important to be able to demonstrate your accomplishments to an administration in a written, measurable form.

SBO: Is there a role that the school music dealer can take in all of this?

Benham: The key role for the music dealer is that they remain politically aware of what goes on in the schools. They can help the teacher organize the music boosters, and they can serve as a supporting constituent in the music boosters organization. But mostly, they can be aware that there is help available, because many times the teacher isn't. The dealer is the one who could bring somebody like myself or someone else in to help deal with it. The key to everything is to take a proactive stance, and work ahead to stave off the problems rather than wait until they're in the middle of a crisis. 