

FIGHT CUTBACKS WITH FIGURES

by John Benham

Can your school afford to lose its music program? Probably not, but you may need to develop a strong fiscal argument to prove it to your administration and school board.

Philosophical versus fiscal issues

While philosophical issues based on solid educational reasoning traditionally have provided teachers and parents with their rationale for maintaining music programs, today's financial crisis dictates a need to demonstrate the cost-efficiency of music programs to those making the cuts.

The secret of winning that case lies in the fiscal reality that music *is* curricular; in other words, it is held during the school day. If we were extracurricular (held outside the school day), money could be saved by the legal possibility of sending students home. No money is saved, however, by cutting music since the students still must be put into a classroom, normally one with a smaller (more costly) student-faculty ratio.

Your student load therefore becomes the key issue!

Financial reality

The most expensive programs are those that are extracurricular and those with the lowest student-faculty ratios. If your average student loads in music are below those of other classroom

teachers, you will need to develop a strong philosophical case!

Equal cuts

If your average student loads are equal to those of other classroom teachers you are financially justified fighting to take only your fair share of cuts. Political expediency seems to indicate that you expect equal cuts, if for no other reason than being able to be the first to ask for program reinstatement as funds become available in the future.

Reverse economics

Normally a music teacher's student load is larger than that of the classroom teacher, and this is where our value is economically most secure. Any cuts in music under these circumstances become reverse economics. Several observations may be made from the following example.

Average student load (regular teacher)	150
Average student load (music teacher)	200

1. If one music teacher is fired, 1.33 teachers will have to be hired (maintained) to cover the same number of students in smaller classes.

2. Three music teachers under these conditions actually handle the equivalent of four teachers' loads. This may be interpreted to pay for one elementary position. (These positions normally are pull-out programs.) If three music teachers are fired, four others will be needed to cover the same students in other classes. Do you begin to see the reverse economics?

3. Statistics indicate that elimination of elementary general, vocal, or

instrumental music leads to a 65 to 70 percent reduction in participation at the secondary levels. Those students then will need to be taught in small, expensive classes when they enter junior high school.

4. There is a danger here! Once your administration realizes the economy of large music classes, the attempt will be made to cancel your group lesson and ensemble programs and fill your load with large group instruction. Small group lessons are essentially free to the district if you handle your 200 students in three or four large groups. Further, statistics show that attrition in excess of 50 percent may be expected when small group lessons are not provided at the secondary level, putting more students right back into those expensive small classes.

Getting organized

Teachers must organize themselves to provide leadership to the community and administration for saving music. Some suggestions include (1) develop a unified structure for leadership between teaching areas; (2) adopt a written integrated curriculum for K-12 music; and (3) purchase a copy of *Arts Education and Brain Research*, by Thomas Regelski.¹

Teachers must organize the public through selection of key parents in each school. Work together with them in the formation of a music parent communications network and a strategies committee to develop fiscal arguments so that *parents* can lead the battle to save your program. (When

John Benham, who taught music for seventeen years in public schools and at California State University, now owns a music instrument repair clinic in Roseville, Minnesota.

¹Regelski, Thomas A. *Arts Education and Brain Research*. (Reston, Va: MENC, 1978).

parents lead the battle the image appears student-centered; when teachers lead it tends to appear job-centered.)

Mostly dos

1. Get organized now and work together.
2. Music is curricular.
 - a. Develop a written integrated K-12 curriculum.
 - b. Develop written philosophical and financial statements.
3. Adopt priorities consistent with the issues.
 - a. Save money.
 - b. Save program integrity.
 - c. Save students' opportunities.
 - d. Save teachers' jobs.
4. Challenge administrative authority.
 - a. The school board is the par-

ents' representative, and the parents have a voting right to demand student-centered decisions.

b. Learn administrative vocabulary and budgetary processes. Check every statistic and develop with own to prove the financial efficiency of your program.

5. Get involved in the process of avoiding cuts.

a. Negotiate for a contract statement that specialists shall be cut at no greater ratio than other staff.

b. Establish maximum loads for music teachers.

6. Be prepared to compromise.

7. Keep informed.

a. Have a representative at all board meetings.

b. Operate openly with the administration and board.

c. Watch out for administrative

games, such as confusing the registration process and impacting teaching schedules.


Some don'ts

1. Don't suggest cuts within your program, but provide impact statements for every potential decision in order to maintain program integrity (balance).

2. Don't resort to name-calling, threats or resignations. That only helps them decide what to cut.

3. Don't become involved in a music versus athletics battle. It tends to weaken your case as a curricular entity.

4. Avoid emotional tricks which tend to negate the factual integrity of your presentation.

5. Don't give up unless you too think music is a frill! 

Benham Beats the Budget Game

When the governor of Minnesota recently cut the state's education budget by 7 percent, Minnesota's music programs clearly were in jeopardy. The Minnesota Music Educators Association (MMEA) responded with a Minnesota Music Town Meeting for 150 music teachers, parents, and music industry representatives to drum up statewide support for the music curriculum.

Leading the way with a presentation of some unconventional lobbying techniques was John Benham, a former teacher in both public schools and at California State University. According to Benham's research, it may cost a school system more to cut a music program than to preserve it.

Although most music teachers today have become accustomed to defending the educational worth of music education, few would dare to persuade a financially strapped school board of music's *financial* justifications. In order to convince legislators and school boards of music's essential nature, Benham advises that teachers rely on the pocketbook approach, organizing parents as well to provide student-centered support.

The Moundsview success

Benham's strategy virtually saved the Moundsview, Minnesota, music

program, where two-thirds of the music educators were headed for unemployment lines. Their straits induced Benham, a resident of the area, to investigate what could happen if serious research were done on the ramifications of such a cut.

By gathering statistics on teacher load, salaries, course offerings, and so on, Benham found that, because music programs had larger classes than other subjects had, it was the cheapest curriculum to maintain. "So why fire the cheaper teacher?" he wondered.

Moundsview suffered cuts in the end, but after seeing Benham's figures, the school board laid off only one-fourth to one-third of the teachers instead of two-thirds as originally proposed.

The secret, said Benham, was that "we stayed off the philosophical issue almost entirely." In addition, he said, "the administration hadn't made any study of the ramifications of their cuts. The cuts were arbitrary." Because of his study, Benham said, "I was able to show rather soundly and convincingly that they'd be spending two dollars for every dollar they were spending now."

Moundsview school board member Ida Rubenstein told *MEJ* that Benham's arguments had a "tremendous"

effect on her thinking. "He immediately went to our real need [finances] instead of being emotional. It had great weight."

Rubenstein had assumed the cuts were necessary until she heard Benham's arguments. Impressed by Benham's unemotional presentation and acknowledgement that music should share equally in the hardship the district faced, as well as by the "courteous, very well-disciplined" parents who came to the meeting, Rubenstein changed her position on the music cuts. "It was very, very key," she said.

Since the Moundsview victory, Benham has helped other school districts fight budgetary battles, meeting with at least partial success in every case. But although Benham is available for consultant work, he emphasizes that figures alone will not save a music curriculum. Parental support is vital, he said, because although many parents do not realize it, their voices carry great weight. "It's time parents realize that the district doesn't belong to the administration," he said. "It belongs to the parents. They have the right to speak up."

Originally published in the April 1982 *Gopher Music Notes*, the adjacent article provides insight into Benham's strategy for saving music programs.—*Erica Beth Weintraub*