

The Cure for Shrinking Music Programs in Schools? Great Teaching.

Posted on 06/16/2015 Written by [TONY](#) 6 COMMENTS



I become very passionate when writing about school administrators' lack of awareness of the benefits of instrumental music in school curricula, and how parents can help advocate for programs that their children are involved in. There is no doubt that music programs all over our nation are constantly in danger of being reduced or cut every budget cycle; many times their fate is in the hands of myopic data-driven bean counters. Until the pendulum swings away from high stakes testing and towards cultivating creativity in schools, maintaining healthy music programs will always be a battle.

As music advocacy and the pressure on administrators and boards of education to keep music programs alive roars on, there is still a ten thousand pound gorilla in the room: There needs to be a *great* teacher in every classroom to carry out the mission of raising the musical bar for all children and creating enduring programs that become mainstays in our school system. Without great teaching, music education in our schools doesn't have a chance.

Many people get angry at me for saying this, but there simply are not enough great music teachers in our system. As a matter of fact, there are too many mediocre and ineffective music teachers to allow for programs to grow in quality *and* quantity the way we all would like. Music education advocates are, instead, busy rushing from one community to another trying to stop cuts instead of advocating for true growth. Unlike any other subject, I believe a *poor* music program is worse than *no* music program -- poor programs give our subject the "frill" label and often leave a bad taste in the mouth of subject area teachers, administrators and parents far beyond the music teacher's tenure in the program. It makes it that much more difficult to advocate for a mediocre music program as time progresses, and also makes it tricky to convince administrators to keep the program once a bad teacher moves on.

Having too many mediocre music teachers in our system creates a huge problem, and a problem that other subject area teachers do not have. If a math teacher is ineffective,

math class does not go away; if an instrumental music teacher is not outstanding, the program may wither away and die. *Is this fair?* Perhaps not, but it doesn't change the fact that we need great music teachers now more than ever before.

A Major Challenge

Over the course of my professional playing and teaching life, I have met thousands of public and private school music teachers who are not competent musicians — they truly embody the “those who cannot do...teach” stigma. However (and very startling to me), I have met just as many wonderful musicians who are extremely ineffective teachers — they would wilt like a delicate flower in front of a class of 50 middle school students (I was one of those, for a time). It has been a failure of many of our higher education systems — both music education institutions and conservatories — that have allowed this disconnect of great teaching and playing to continue to exist, and the trickle down effect can be seen in our dwindling school programs.

Here are 3 critical attributes that music teachers must have in order to have a chance at creating (and maintaining) a successful school music program:

1. **The teacher *must* be a great musician.** A distinguished instrumental music teacher must have experienced greatness in their craft in some form. If a teacher has never learned how to create a beautiful sound, how can they effectively train others to do it? A great teacher is a lifelong student of the craft, and practices just as consistently as they ask their students to practice. A great music teacher is consistently modeling high levels of musicianship in every way, and sets the bar at a professional standard for their students. I believe that the reason why many music programs are marginalized and/or cut is due to mediocre musicians at the head of the class who are content with mediocre results, simply because they can't hear the difference.
2. **The teacher must be engaged in learning how they became a great musician and be passionate about delivering that information to children.** As I mentioned above, there are many great musicians who are ineffective teachers. Anyone who has not been forced to think about *how* they do things will have a difficult time teaching it to others. A great teacher must be able to keep concepts at a high level, but make the explanations simple based on the age of the group they teach. They must be dedicated to developing themselves as a pedagogue; constantly searching for new ways to allow *all students* to reach their potential and become proficient at a musical instrument. They must be able to break things down into their smallest part in order for every child to find success at

musical skills. This takes patience, planning and time to develop the “teaching muscle”.

- 3. The teacher must have an undying vision of a great program.** A great music teacher has a crystal clear picture in his/her mind of every aspect of a great school music program; from what it looks like when one walks into the classroom to the sounds that every child should be producing from their instrument. This vision is reflected on, revisited and revised constantly, but it is a musical vision primarily. The teacher must be able to effectively communicate that vision to students, parents, teachers and school leaders. The vision must be *musical first* — all the gritty details follow that musical vision thereafter.

These three attributes of a great music teacher are absolutely necessary, but it’s still just the beginning. Incredible organizational skills and an ability to work with school leadership, teachers and parents is crucial to a program’s success in a school system. But without a great musical mind and a passion for lifelong learning on the part of the teacher, an instrumental music program is doomed to wallow in mediocrity, and all the music advocacy in the world will fall short of achieving its goal.

All said, I believe that we are about to enter a very exciting time in public education. More students than ever are attending schools of music for college, yet there are less playing jobs than ever to be had, which means that there is a growing pool of potential great teachers. Our nation is close to hitting a tipping point in education where over-testing will have been proven not to work, and a more creative approach to education will be embraced. The music world needs to be ready for this — we will only get one chance to succeed.

A vast majority of our children are perfectly capable of being good musicians. Most people do not want to admit it, but a constant culture of mediocrity throughout our education system keeps these children from a lifelong love of performing and appreciating music. Current and potential teachers must continue to invest in their own musical growth, and institutions of music, school systems, teacher unions and arts organizations must partner up in order to assist these teachers with their vision, program building and development as musicians and professionals.

If music programs are going to survive and thrive, everyone needs to share in reflecting on and improving their performance. It’s never too late to pick up our instrument and re-engage with what got us to this point. We can all do better.