

FOCUS ON ADVOCACY: Keeping Your Momentum, Even in Troubled Times

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“Most of the important things in the world have been accomplished by people who have kept on trying when there seemed to be no hope at all.” -D.B. Carnegie

The crisis facing music education in our nation’s public school system seems to grow more daunting with each passing day as the great recession drags on. In my state, California, music education advocates are facing an alarming challenge as the state’s economy continues to deteriorate. Still reeling from the \$8.6 billion cut to the state’s education budget in February, which led to thousands of teacher layoffs and the elimination of many music programs this month, music educators and advocates are bracing themselves for another devastating blow. This week it was announced that state legislators must find a way to cut an additional \$24 billion from this year’s budget, and all signs indicate that public education will again be hardest hit.

School music programs in many other parts of the country are also in danger. Now, in this moment of crisis and doubt, our advocacy efforts are more important than ever before. Hopelessness is a choice that we cannot afford to make right now. Surrender or inaction simply aren’t options for those of us who believe in the power and importance of music education.

Every advocacy situation is by nature unique, and to be successful each campaign must be crafted and implemented differently. This article, which draws on lessons I’ve learned during several successful music advocacy efforts, will give you some basic concepts and strategies to consider as you address the challenges facing your community’s school music programs.

Organization and Execution: The Keys to Success

The process starts with building your local music education coalition. This is not always a quick or easy process, but the work invested here will lay a solid foundation for success. If you are starting from scratch, work hard to engage all stakeholders, including students, parents, teachers, administrators, community organizations, business leaders, and city officials. If you have a core group already in place, consider reaching out to a wider base of potential members and try to develop the broadest coalition possible.

Since it is very important that you are able to get information out to your group quickly and reliably, keep an accurate and up-to-date contact list with email addresses and phone numbers for all coalition members. I have found email communications to be the most efficient and effective means of keeping a coalition informed and energized.

Work together with your group members to develop a comprehensive but succinct action plan that can be easily communicated to the entire coalition. Invite all stakeholders to an open forum and encourage everyone to express their ideas and concerns. Once you decide what strategies to include in your action plan—I recommend keeping it to five memorable action items—communicate the plan to anyone and everyone who would be affected if the music program was cut or diminished.

Essential Strategies in a Comprehensive Advocacy Campaign

- **Circulating Petitions** - Students and parents, music stores and other businesses may be happy to help distribute and post copies of the petition. Many free online petition hosting services allow you to circulate the petition via email.
- **Writing Letters & Reaching Out** - Letters, emails, phone calls, or personal meetings with your school administrators can have a huge impact. I have found it helpful to provide a few talking points to all members of your coalition and ask them each to correspond with at least three different district officials. It is important to communicate the true value of the music faculty, and I highly recommend reading Dr. Benham’s Counter Point series on FTE – starting with his basic primer and how to use the staffing ratio – for some great pointers on this.

- Engaging the Media - This important step requires a concerted effort by many community members and can make all the difference in the final outcome of your effort. Ask people to write letters to local newspaper editors, and contact local television and radio news directors. Your goal is to let the media know about the threat to the local school music program, fill them in on your coalition's efforts, and invite them to cover the story and attend any meetings. Having a news camera crew in attendance at a school board meeting can really exert pressure and change the dynamic significantly.
- Attending District Board Meetings - Showing up in numbers to district board of education meetings lets administrators know that your community values music education, and that voters will mobilize to oppose any cutbacks. Though it's an obvious strategy, putting some thought and planning into its execution can increase your impact dramatically. Make some signs with slogans and wear buttons or a unified color to show solidarity. Organize a variety of community speakers, including students, to address the board during the public comments section of the meeting. Encourage everyone to keep their message short and succinct, and to avoid duplicating what others have already said. Keep the focus on students and the benefits of music education. It's very effective to have some students playing music as people are arriving for the meeting.

Successful Music Advocacy Relies Upon Creating Strong Relationships

Music itself is a set of modulating relationships between time, rhythm, pitch and melody. It depends upon the relationships between teacher and student, student and instrument, musician and ensemble, and ensemble and audience. Many of us tend to forget, as we mount our advocacy efforts, that music education also depends on healthy relationships between the community and school administrators.

Approaching your advocacy with overt frustration, anger, or distrust can alienate the decision makers and undermine your goals. Rather than letting your emotions show and ultimately making it easier for an administrator to be dismissive of your message, consider tempering all of your communications with understanding, support, kindness and, most of all, respect. My experience has been that this sensible strategy can pay huge dividends.

For more information about how to advocate for a complete education that includes music instruction for every child, download the SupportMusic Community Action Kit.

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No matter how grim the situation appears to be for your school music program, your advocacy efforts can have a positive impact. Franklin Delano Roosevelt once said, "When you come to the end of your rope, tie a knot and hold on." Determination, optimism, compassion and above all persistence are the knots we must tie as we confront this crisis. If we hold on together—all of us who know what music education can mean to our children and their success and happiness in life—this too shall pass.

Having compassion for administrators who are dealing with extremely tough choices about how to balance programmatic reductions with what is best for the students and community, can help you develop and strengthen this crucial relationship. It is important to recognize that the vast majority of school administrators are working very hard to make the best choices possible, and that they do have the best interests of our children in mind.