

Forestalling Budget Problems

by John Benham

The theory of reverse economics in education (in the August 1991 issue of *The Instrumentalist*) demonstrates how curtailments in music programs usually do not save money for the school district, and often end up costing the district money. Music teachers have more students each day and each week than do teachers in almost any other department. If one music director is eliminated, it will be necessary for the school district to hire several teachers of other subjects to fill the void.

While more than \$8 million for threatened music departments have been preserved using this concept, directors should realize that most educational decisions are not made on the basis of economics (or even by the standard of what is best for students). Administrators and school boards are political creatures. Although the interests of students are always discussed and usually considered, superintendents and board members make few choices that will reduce the chances for reelection or make their lives uncomfortable.

If music educators come to understand the politics behind most educational decisions, they can eliminate many of the incentives to cut music programs that have no basis in economics. Moreover, if a cutback is proposed, the steps taken in advance will be an important line of defense in thwarting it.

Most directors faced with a budget reduction are caught by surprise, having thought the program was secure right up to the time it was announced. The advance notice to teachers on such proposals is usually about seven days. Most issues are discussed by school boards months before a solution is proposed, but most teachers do not attend meetings or understand the political process. Uninformed teachers may blithely assert that the district has a history of strong arts programs in the belief that the department is immune to reduction or elimination. Even directors who stay abreast of school board actions sometimes discount a proposed budget reduction as merely a bluff to generate support for an increase in the tax levy. Directors should always take such administrative proposals seriously.

Another factor contributing to directors' failure to challenge program cuts is apathy to political decisions as they evolve. When teachers graduate from college, they cannot imagine that others do not share their love for music or that their own

passion for it will diminish. As demands on their time and energy increase, however, many directors take job security for granted and ignore the reality that preserving music programs is largely their responsibility. Citing either seniority or exhaustion, some music teachers passively accept school board action in the false belief that their jobs are safe or that speaking up will make the situation worse. Too many school decisions are focused on the consequences these issues will have on adults instead of whether the choices will help or hinder the children.

Before attempting to defend a music program from a proposed cutback, it is important that directors identify their personal interests and motivations because these will likely affect the tone and content of discussions about why music programs should continue to have the support of the school board and administration.

Take five minutes and write down your philosophy of teaching. Complete the sentence, "I teach music because _____" with the first idea that comes to mind. Examine what you have written for the attitudes it reflects about students: whether you teach to help students or to boost the stature of the program. A teacher's underlying motives invariably shape relationships with students, colleagues, and the community.

Music programs have been curtailed because everyone hated working with one music teacher, and a financial crisis merely provided the opportunity to remove this individual. One school district recommended a 50% cut in the music department, but the underlying purpose was simply to remove one teacher, not to save money or to reflect diminished interest in music. Another district

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John Benham's full-length manuscript on this subject is available for \$14.95 (first class postage included) from Music in World Cultures, Inc., 1507 Knoll Drive, Shoreview, Minnesota (612) 783-0902, or directors may call about problems or workshops.

eliminated the entire elementary program for a similar reason.

Long before a budget problem arises, directors should communicate directly with administrators, faculty, and board members about the goals of the music department. This dialogue should continue over a period of years; simply inviting the superintendent to attend a band concert three days before the music program is cut will not suffice.

Music teachers should explain how they teach and what are the benefits to students from music education. Everyone has taken algebra and knows what happens in that course, but the daily rehearsals to learn a composition and transferring musical values to students are a mystery to many school board members. It is your job to tell them. While music programs are thriving and unthreatened, invite these decision-makers to a rehearsal that is not a staged performance. On a continuing basis it is important that music teachers find a way to work with school administrators and to work toward solutions with them.

In one district the music program faced a 50% budget reduction, even though the school system was thriving. When I asked the music teachers to explain why their program was being cut, they responded that the superintendent and his assistant were difficult to work with and never came to concerts while excluding music teachers from budget planning. When pressed further, the music teachers admitted that the current administration had only been in the district for a year and similar problems had existed over a long period.

I asked the superintendent for his impressions of the music teachers, and he offered a similar list of complaints. He felt they wanted the rest of the school to schedule classes and activities around them, and that in rehearsals directors simply took out a piece of music and rehearsed it, without having a formal curriculum as in other departments. The administrator did praise the value of the marching band but noted that it was not an important educational goal. The superintendent and his assistant confessed to a bias against all music teachers. It was clear that these attitudes had been formed over an extended number of years, and that the complaints from both sides resulted from long-standing beliefs, not from specific actions. When the teachers and administrators in this district finally discussed these problems, they were able to find solutions.

Many directors have a strong sense that only they can save the program, and this keeps them from seeking help from others. Some fail to cultivate parents as potential defenders of the program because directors view parents only as fund-raisers who leave the directors free to teach. Many parents have told me how frustrated they are with directors who say in effect, "Give us your kids, raise the funds, and get out of our hair." Such a

lack of cooperation between boosters and teachers leaves both groups unprepared to act when budget cuts are proposed. A music program with avid, well-organized, community support is less vulnerable to cuts, but directors can achieve this only by shedding their pride and asking for help.

The first step in building public support is to discard the notions that booster groups should exist solely to raise money or that only parents of music students should be involved. All taxpayers are the rightful owners of a school and are equally entitled to influence a school board's decisions. A surprising number of citizens will support strong music programs; in some cases the spouse of an opponent is a secret advocate of music. It is important to find these people before a music program cut is threatened; when you become acquainted with them it will be clear that their skills extend beyond holding bake sales. Remember that the very fact that the community supports fund-raising activities for music may inadvertently imperil the program; if the board feels that the boosters can raise large amounts of money, it may divert the music budgets to other areas.

Find people to work on a music department newsletter that includes information on all areas of the music department. Make sure that band, orchestra, choir, and general music supporters are included in one umbrella organization; too often the band booster group ignores other music groups. Identify parents willing to serve on committees to work with the administration in solving staffing, scheduling, and curriculum problems. In the current trend of school reform, many districts are giving greater power to individual schools under the theory of site-based management.

The music boosters should have representatives on administrative committees to express support for music and to report on any threats to the program. With time and organization these music boosters can become a strong force for preserving the program by influencing administrative decisions. It is important to identify those parents willing to be called for help in the event the board proposes a cut. Few school boards can resist the political pressure of hundreds of parents filling a meeting hall.

However, even the strongest music booster group will be ineffective without a unified music faculty. It is impossible to avoid all personality conflicts, but some departments are so sharply divided that the teachers barely speak. A querulous music faculty is an appealing target for budget cuts. Sometimes administrators will ask each member of the music department to suggest which areas of the music budget should be reduced. Teachers should never suggest such cuts to administrators. If music budget cuts are proposed, music teachers should only demonstrate what results will flow

from that level of cutbacks if applied to all levels of music equally, never showing greater cuts in one area than in another, even by way of illustration. Without a united front, teachers are likely to suggest a reduction in any area except theirs. If the administrator finds enough disagreement over which part of the program to eliminate, he will have a free hand to make the choice himself.

In one Midwestern school district, the elementary band program was nearly cut without the junior high and high school even knowing about

the proposal. The high school band director accidentally learned of the cut on a visit to the superintendent. The astonishing part of this case was that the elimination of the program was suggested by the elementary school music teacher himself. He had been hired over the objections of others in the district and suggested eliminating the elementary program later to cripple the upper-level ensembles in later years. This act of revenge almost went unnoticed. The real or imagined hostility to one teacher nearly cost the entire program. In my

Reverse Economics Revisited

Music programs are often the first target of administrators facing a budget cutback. Many school board members do not realize that music teachers instruct more students than teachers of other academic classes. The typical size of an English or geometry class is 25-30 students, but most music classes are much larger. If a music position is eliminated, additional teachers will be needed to deal with students during these periods. The only activity with a comparable size to music classes is a study hall, and there is a limit to how many a student can be given.

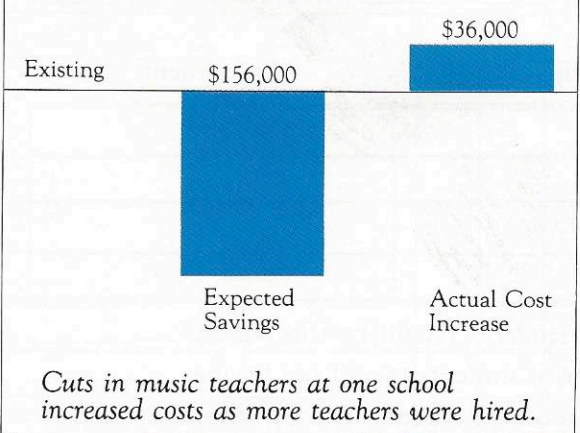
In some districts music courses are about the same size as other academic courses often because a weak teacher has lost students or as a result of previous budget cuts, as when a lower school eliminates music and fewer musicians enroll in the higher grades. The reverse economic argument is less persuasive in these cases, and the music budget should be defended on other grounds. If a cut is unavoidable, urge that the reduction be made equally among all music groups in the district. This is important because the elimination of the elementary school program will devastate the junior high and high school ensembles. The number of students who begin playing soon decreases. If enrollment

plummets in these groups, even dedicated students will quit. A young band with only eighteen members can hardly make satisfying music. Cuts in elementary school music programs appear to save money because students can return to regular classes. However, by the time students from such a school reach high school, more non-music teachers will have to be hired because the music programs at all levels have been eliminated.

Reverse Economics

<p>If a school eliminates</p> <p>3 music teachers</p> <p>who have 200 students each (600 total)</p>	<p>School district suffers a net loss because</p> <p>4 new teachers</p> <p>with normal class load of 150 students (600 total) are needed after cutting music</p>
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**Proposed Music Cuts
First Year Results**



One district in California had 13,000 students and a total music enrollment of 150. They had 3.2 music teachers instructing about 50 students each. This was wasteful economy because the music teachers taught fewer students than others on the faculty. Fifteen years earlier each school in the district had 250-350 students in music classes. Whittling one teacher at a time, the district produced the collapse of a music program. When we showed the board these figures, they reversed the planned budget cut and the district began rebuilding its program.

The reverse economics argument is just one of many useful tools to fight budget cuts. Of course the best argument to sustain programs is effective teaching that contributes to a student's education. However, when philosophical arguments will not persuade administrators, be ready with detailed information on teaching loads and enrollment. The forms reprinted in this article will help directors identify trends and problems in a music program.

own school district the band and orchestra teachers at all levels have met once a month for ten years. They diligently attend school board meetings and learn about any potential cuts months in advance and are prepared to act.

A unified music faculty and music booster group should work together to create a coherent budget. Most teachers spent no time in college studying economics, and the budgets they submit to administrators lack the details necessary to defend them. If a music department asked for \$16,000 in the capital budget, an administrator might be shocked by the figure and reject it. Teachers should explain and be prepared to justify each part of the budget, making it clear how the requested money would be spread over several ensembles and how many performances each ensemble will give during the year. Some administrators complain that the cost of instruments and other supplies makes the music department far more expensive than other academic areas. Be ready to argue that compared with the rising cost of textbooks in subjects such as English and history, the cost of the music programs is not excessive.

Even if the administration accepts your proposed budget, the music program can still be decimated by scheduling problems. Some school administrators deliberately sabotage music programs, as one did by leaving music off the student course guides. Others effectively undermine music classes by scheduling ensembles after the school day or in conflict with certain essential academic classes.

Teachers usually are last to find out about scheduling problems, which have become more numerous in recent years as school reform efforts increased graduation and college entrance requirements. Although music directors do not dispute the value of competence in English and mathematics, it is important that they regularly and articulately remind administrators of the rationale for

music education. Without solid philosophical and economic reasons behind music programs, there are all too many excuses to curtail music and other arts programs, even without a budget crunch.

Directors should identify and make friends of the staff members who schedule classes or program the computers that produce class schedules. Many schools have a computer whiz who creates class schedules; this is one person to make friends with the first day you start at a school. Don't try to win special favors from or to exert pressure, but work with him to solve any conflicts before the entire trumpet section is enrolled in calculus during the concert band period.

Many larger districts hire private companies to schedule classes, thereby making it difficult to meet the people or to influence schedules. It is worthwhile to identify these people and to explain your scheduling requests. Be sure that guidance counselors understand the importance of music to a student's intellectual and social development. Counselors who do not understand the value of music education to the development of the academic side of students are less likely to encourage enrollment in music courses.

Colleagues and the teachers union can become advocates for music if you work with them. Explain to union leaders annually the teaching load music teachers have and how the high number of students in music ensembles allows academic teachers to have smaller classes. By earning the professional respect of the teachers' association and by supporting issues that concern all teachers, you may earn support for the music program. Share your written budget and curriculum with union leaders to inform them that the music faculty does more than lead the marching band at football games.

When taking trips with the marching band or scheduling a special rehearsal, remember the effect

Student/teacher ratio for school year 19__ to 19__

☐ Full time or __ %

Teacher _____ Salary \$ _____ Years of seniority _____

Use one sheet for each teacher.

School

Group

Enrollment

Total number of students taught by this teacher _____

School average number of students taught per teacher _____

(Track for years before
budget crisis arises.)

Divide this teacher's student load by school
average for equivalent full-time teaching _____

upon other classes. When you pull students out of other classes, confer with these teachers in advance to work out the best schedule for all, keeping the interests of students in the forefront. If colleagues give assistance, be sure to acknowledge this at concerts.

Get to know the custodial staff and treat them with respect; their work behind the scenes helps you concentrate on building a program and teaching students. Music teachers sometimes forget that the secretarial staff has contact with the entire school as well as with community. Let the music boosters know which staff members give the music program extra help and find a formal method to honor them at the end of the school year.

Ultimately music teachers sustain the program through superior teaching and with administrative support. Many directors wait until a crisis arises before talking with principals, superintendents, and board members about the music curriculum and activities. It is not enough to print concert times on the school calendar and expect administrators to attend. Invite each one personally.

Many school decision makers have never seen a band or orchestra rehearsal; invite them to observe one and gain some understanding of how students learn the elements of musical development and education. After seeing music ensembles in several events, administrators will be less likely to view the department as line items on a budget.

If the school board decides to cut the program, eschew emotional pleas to win favor. Call music faculty and boosters together to develop a proposal to save the program. If reverse economics helps justify music ensembles, draw up statistics and charts that explain exactly how much money the district will lose by replacing music teachers with other classes or study halls. When making a proposal to the board, have as many music supporters as possible attend the meeting. Give each booster an

identification badge and advance copies of the proposal so they will understand the arguments. Only a few people should speak for the proposal because endless pleas from parents will weaken the presentation. Parents can weaken the presentation. Parents and supporters should refrain from shouting or booing, as this may embarrass some board members and diminish support for the program.

Music teachers and parents should understand the language used by administrators in discussing budgets; ignorance about the jargon or process of the school system will increase the odds your proposal will be rejected. If possible, meet with sympathetic board members in advance of the final meeting to identify any weaknesses in the proposal. Behind-the-scenes persuasion sometimes can avoid a public confrontation with administrators. After one music reduction proposal was successfully defeated, a board member commented that the music department had made two smart choices: bringing in an outside consultant to plead the case and using private meetings to avoid public confrontations.

Even if a budget reduction proposal is defeated, the music program can be curtailed through scheduling or other ploys. Do not simply celebrate the victory but watch closely for such administrative tricks as reducing the transportation budget or assessing tuition charges for students in the band. Remember that you may have to defend the program in a later year, but a humiliating shouting match at a board meeting may create lasting enemies. Relevant arguments presented with civility make it possible to sustain the program in future years. No matter how time-consuming it is to develop better relationships with administrators or school board members while increasing enthusiasm in parents and students for the program, music education will improve student lives and make the effort worthwhile. □

Music enrollment by school and grade. School year 19__ to 19__

Music enrollment by school and grade. School year 19__ to 19__												
School	Group/ensemble	Grade level of students										Total in each music group
		4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12		

(Provide one line for each group in each school in the district.)