

## **Music Advocacy for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

We live in an environment of increasing standards and expectations for our schools to provide students with an education worthy of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Complicating that challenge is the fact that we also live in an environment of increasingly scarce educational resources. That being the case, virtually every school district in the country is being forced to consider which programs and activities to sponsor. While federal and state mandates dictate most program priorities and funding, it is in the area of extracurricular activities where local authorities have the most freedom to prioritize and fund programs. In other words, when educational priorities must be set and cuts made, it is extracurricular activities, specifically athletics programs versus programs in music and the arts, that are on the table for discussion.

That said, it seems that when push comes to shove, it is music and the arts rather than football and other sports that end up being scaled back or eliminated. Given these trends, a case can be made that the music community's advocacy efforts are not nearly as effective and organized as those of the sports community. Given the environment mentioned above, the importance of effectively advocating for music education cannot be overemphasized.

In 2006, I lead a team that founded Music For Everyone (Music For Everyone.net), a non-profit organization dedicated to cultivating the power of music as an educational and community building tool in Lancaster County, PA. Since then, MFE has invested almost \$1.5 million in grants, scholarships and direct program support to schools and community art groups to enhance their music programs.

As the organization has evolved, it has become abundantly clear that the types of funding and instructional gaps that MFE is attempting to bridge will only become more pronounced. For example, in 2017, we awarded over \$100,000 in grants. Unfortunately, we received requests for almost \$300,000. As a result, we've realized that we must become more effective in our advocacy efforts as the competition for increasingly scarce public and private money and resources is becoming more

intense. By all indications, the advocacy challenges we face at MFE are no different than those of virtually every arts organization in the country.

As a lifelong musician, I fully understand and appreciate the power and potential of music as an educational and community building tool. But as someone who is relatively new to the field of music education and strategic philanthropy, I am puzzled by the inability of the music community to be more effective in advocating for music education.

The purpose of this essay is to offer, from the eyes of a relative newcomer to the field, three observations and suggestions regarding how the music community can improve its advocacy efforts.

### Overcoming the Reluctance to Compare and Contrast

In a perfect world, no educational programs, extracurricular or otherwise, would be cut. But it is clear that we no longer live in a perfect world. The fact is, cuts are going to be made and we can no longer shy away from making direct comparisons between the educational return on investment in music programs versus investment return for other programs. That is the playing field upon which discussions and decisions regarding which programs get downsized or eliminated, is taking place. The music community's reluctance to aggressively use this tactic is particularly frustrating because when such comparisons are made the difference in educational ROI is stark.

In my book, *Ball or Bands: Football vs. Music as an Educational and Community Investment*, I conducted a thorough educational return on investment analysis of music versus football programs. If you were scoring that comparison like a football game, it would be a rout. The final score would be Music – 55 and Football – 20.

While the primary justification for football is that it teaches important “character” lessons in teamwork, discipline and personal responsibility and keeps students more “engaged” with school, music clearly produces the identical benefits. I have been on a five-person basketball team striving to achieve a common goal of winning

games and I have been in a five-person band striving to achieve a particular sound. The lessons learned in each of these activities are identical. For every story of a student who wouldn't remain engaged in school without football, there is a similar story about a student who participates in a music program. The notion that football is uniquely qualified to teach these lessons and in the process, keep students more engaged with school is a myth. Music clearly yields the same educational, character building and engagement benefits.

Looking beyond that primary justification however, paints a different picture.

From music's capacity to be a life long participatory learning activity (for 99% of participants their final high school game will be the last time they ever play the game) to the fact that it is the universal language (football is uniquely American), to its inclusiveness (everyone, versus only boys, can participate), to far lower cost per student ratio to the potential it offers as a platform for international and interdisciplinary studies (essential for a modern day education), to its effectiveness in strengthening brain neural activity and development (versus the possibility, if not likelihood, of sustaining brain trauma), music's educational ROI is infinitely better than football's. Further, football's effectiveness as an educational tool has been steadily decreasing as it has become more about the end result (winning) and less about the process (education). Clearly, music is far superior to football in terms of educational return.

That being the case, it is perfectly legitimate to raise these and the following issues. Football was incorporated into our educational system in the early 1900's because it was viewed as a way to train a workforce for an industrial economy. But we no longer live in an industrial economy. We now live in an information based, entrepreneurial global economy and world community where the fundamental skills necessary to thrive include creativity and innovation. And the most effective tool in our educational arsenal to teach creativity is music, producing educational results that are much more in line with the challenges presented by a creative,

information based, global economy and world community than those produced by football.

This is not to say that football does not have a place in our society. It does. Rather the question is whether it is educationally responsible to continue to invest in football, though very popular and highly entertaining, at the expense of music when it is clear that music yields a far better educational ROI. If we care about the education of our children, we cannot be shy about aggressively comparing and contrasting the value of music programs versus other extra-curricular activities and programs, including the elephant in the room, football.

### Expanding the Advocacy “Playing Field”

The second way in which the music community must reorient its advocacy strategy is to expand that advocacy narrative beyond the “arts for arts sake” argument. That narrative is no longer enough. While music educators fully understand and appreciate music’s value, it can’t be taken for granted that the individuals who ultimately determine funding and program priorities (administrators, parents, business leaders) also appreciate and understand that value. That being the case, music education advocates must expand their advocacy narrative to include music’s impact on additional educational and community outcomes.

For example, research tells us that music has very direct, measurable impacts on academic outcomes in math, reading, language and logic, while football’s impact in these areas is negligible. When the primary justification for both music and football is that they are valuable educational tools, highlighting that music is clearly more effective in producing direct educational outcomes is not something that should be downplayed, but rather highlighted.

Additionally, while a winning football team can bring a community together, music advocates should not surrender that point without a fight. As the universal language, music’s potential as a community building resource is very powerful.

Further, investment in music programs can have a significant impact on a community's economic vibrancy. Many communities are beginning to focus on promoting music and the arts as a way to drive economic activity and vibrancy. Included as part of that strategy is a strong commitment to both community-based and school sponsored music and arts programs.

Finally, music's potential as a tool to improve both individual and community health is an area that is beginning to receive more attention. Research regarding music's effectiveness as a healing and therapeutic resource is growing dramatically. Meanwhile, football's impact on individual health can best be described as punitive, with a growing body of research proving it. Or, stated more succinctly, should the role of our educational institutions be to sponsor activities that strengthen brains or "scrambles" them?

That being the case, music advocates should aggressively expand the theoretical "value of music" narrative to include these concrete, specific impacts and outcomes. In short, when the case to be made for music as a superior educational and community investment is so clear, it makes no sense not to highlight that superiority in very focused and strategic ways.

### Core or Extracurricular?

Finally, a concern often expressed by music educators is that classifying music as an extracurricular activity for purposes of such comparison diminishes music's educational standing and impact.

While that may be true to some degree, the fact is, if music is going to be compared to athletics when it comes to funding decisions, it is imperative that those comparisons be made on a level playing field. While it's clear to music advocates that music is a core subject area, to be able to effectively advocate and compare music to football, we will simply have to accept the fact that most of the people who are making funding decisions, consider both music and athletics as extracurricular. The first lesson in Marketing 101 is to know your audience. There are still many

decision makers on school boards and in communities who view both music and football as extracurricular activities. Sometimes, you have to engage in debate on terms that might not be the exact terms upon which you would prefer to engage. This is one of those times.

In a world of declining resources and increasing expectations for what constitutes an education worthy of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, every dollar counts. In such an environment, being able to effectively advocate for programs that yield the most effective educational ROI becomes critically important. As music's power and potential as an effective educational tool becomes more apparent, music educators and advocates must become more aggressive and strategic in advancing music's impact as a superior educational investment.

Our children deserve nothing less.

*Dr. John Gerdy is executive director of Music For Everyone and author of several books, including, "Ball or Bands: Football vs. Music as an Educational and Community Investment". His website is: [JohnGerdy.com](http://JohnGerdy.com)*