

FEATURE ARTICLE

Moving Forward With Focus

by Patrick M. Jones

Introduction

In the last issue of *PMEA News* I reported on strategic planning done by attendees of the summer Professional Development Seminar.¹ The participants, who represented all PMEA districts and every level from elementary to university, developed an extensive and impressive list of 90 recommendations to guide Pennsylvania music educators into the future. I recommended each one of us select a few items from the list and begin implementing them now. I hope we're all doing that and haven't lost the list under the pile on our desks or simply filed it away as yet another strategic plan to gather dust while we continue doing what we've always done the way we've always done it. Pennsylvania is in decline and in the midst of a massive economic reorientation.² The recommendations made can help revitalize our communities and prepare our students for the society in which they must work and live.³

In the summary of that article I identified six broad strands that cut across the various levels to which the 90 recommendations are addressed.⁴ Taking a second look at the 90 recommendations from this perspective helps insure we address the global spirit of the attendees' intentions in addition to their specific recommendations, thus helping us "see the forest" of which the 90 specific recommendations are the trees. Turning these six strands into questions helps us focus our curricular self-critique as we ask ourselves to what extent we and our curricula...

1. ...focus on lifelong and lifewide musicing?



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2. ...engage all students musically?
3. ...offer a broader variety of instruments, ensembles and genres?
4. ...develop students' musical collaboration and musical leadership skills through small ensembles?
5. ...focus on student creativity and development of their independent musicianship?
6. ...connect music curricula and offerings to other curricular areas and the wider community?

Please take a few minutes to write your answers to each of the preceding questions before continuing to read this article. You may be surprised at what you are already doing and will perhaps also begin formulating ideas of how you can increase offerings in some areas and develop curricula in others where you currently have none.

Discussion

If we were together in a group of teachers right now we could share what we've written. We'd hear examples and get ideas from things people are already doing and brainstorm on how to develop relevant new curricula. Unfortunately, we're not together and the format of a print journal being one-directional does not lend itself to dialogical "give and take." Thus, I will expound on them here as if we were sitting and discussing them over a cup of coffee.

1. Focus on lifelong and lifewide musicing.

Preparing students for a life of musicing is the *raison d'être* of music education. Our level of success in this area is the measure of our effectiveness as a profession. Intellectual honesty requires us to admit we do not deserve a passing grade in this area. I know this

is painful to admit but it's true. As a profession we have been too focused on musicing within the school building and the K12 years in isolation from the greater community and lifespan of our citizens. There are three ways we can immediately remedy this situation:

A. Connect students to musical opportunities that already exist within the community.

There are very obvious opportunities in many communities such as community bands, choirs and orchestras as well as groups in churches and synagogues that are easily accessible for our students utilizing the musical skills they currently develop in school. There may be other opportunities within the community that we have not been addressing in our curricula such as hand bell choirs in churches or community African drumming ensembles. In such cases we would want to start offering hand bells and African drumming in school to prepare students for musical participation in the community. We simply need to find out what opportunities are available in the community and begin orienting curricular offerings to them.

B. Create musical opportunities within the community.

This has been addressed numerous times in MENC publications. School music teachers possess the expertise to organize community groups such as bands, choirs, orchestras, jazz bands etc. We could also offer seasonal opportunities for musicing that don't require sustained involvement. Such offerings might include a community theater musical production, a community performance of *The Messiah*, etc. This is the perfect opportunity to fulfill our role as musical leaders in the community.

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C. Help our students develop the expertise to organize their own musical experiences.

This is the long-term solution to our current disconnect from the community. It would be a Neo-Renaissance movement where people pursue music in informal social settings as a hobby. Such ensembles need to be small and not dependent on an expert leading them. These would consist of groups of 4-5 musicians, which is a manageable size for people to gather regularly for recreational music.

Anything larger would be more difficult for busy students and working adults to schedule on a regular basis. The genres must be such that people will actually be interested in participating and sharing their music with their families and friends. We must be visionary in this effort and open to such ensembles consisting of singing, acoustic instruments, electronic instruments and digital audio technology. The genres can vary from Madrigals to Barbershop and String Quartets to Bluegrass. All genres are welcome that foster people making music together as a hobby.

2. Engage all students musically.

The declining participation of students in music programs as they progress through their school years concerns all of us. The end result of our traditional programs has left the majority of Americans with, at best, a sixth or seventh grade education in music. Upon graduation they enter a world filled with positive musical opportunities and mass commercialization unprepared to participate in the former or critically scrutinize the latter. This is unacceptable and we have the ability to redress it. The best way to equip them to engage musically with their community and to be musically critical is to help them grow as musicians themselves so they develop their own musicianship and informed musical standards. The basic problem we face is getting to them. While adolescents love music and probably spend more

time, money and energy on it than any other age demographic, they overwhelmingly dislike traditional school music offerings. Thus, to engage with them we must offer a variety of genres, ensembles and courses that interest them.

3. Offer a broader variety of instruments, ensembles and genres.

This is the “elephant in the room” we too often avoid discussing. It’s not that we don’t recognize the value and need for ensembles other than what we already offer. We just simply don’t know how to do them. The narrow training we received as music education majors did not prepare us to address the musical needs of all students and communities. We were trained to be band, choir, orchestra and general music specialists and most of us personally enjoy our specialties and define ourselves by them. Facing up to the challenge of this area will require us to leave our comfort zones and expand our own musical horizons. We will need to become comfortable with not being experts in all genres we offer and accept that it is okay, in some ways even preferable, for us to be co-learners with our students. There are two steps to begin offering a broader variety of musics. First is determining which genres to offer. Second is developing the expertise necessary to offer them.

A. Selecting Genres.

Last spring I answered the question “In a world of musics, how do you decide which ones to teach?” with the response “In a world of musics, we should decide to teach those musics that allow our students to make value and meaning in their lives by making music in the most authentic of contexts, those in which they live.”⁵ This suggests that finding the genres to offer is quite simple and requires us to do two small research projects.

First, we need to simply look around the community in which our schools are located and see what musical genres

exist. They might be anything such as hand bell choirs in churches, community bands, folk and Bluegrass festivals, an African drumming group, a community youth center with garage bands, a coffee shop with open microphone singer/songwriter nights, a Mariachi festival, a Gospel choir, a salsa band, a Barbershop/Sweet Adeline’s chorus or even a Mummer’s String Band. Second, we need to ask the students **not** involved in our current programs which genres they would be interested in studying and performing. My students did this last spring in the middle and high schools in which they were student teaching. They produced surveys and utilized various methods to reach students not currently taking music classes. The results indicated that most students are very interested in music and that they had a wider and greater variety of musical interests than we might assume. Such survey results can provide insight into the musical tastes and interests of our students to help us develop our curricular offerings.

B. Developing Expertise.

Once we’ve determined the genres to offer we need to develop expertise in them. There are two complementary approaches to doing this. One is to go outside our schools and gain expertise via lessons, workshops, attending concerts and festivals, reading books and articles, listening to CDs etc. The second is to bring experts into our schools as clinicians and “artists in residence” to work with us and our students in developing various offerings.⁶ We also cannot overlook the musical expertise many of our students bring to school from their out of school musical experiences. I am constantly amazed at how my classes routinely include students who perform in Blues, bluegrass, folk and pop/rock “cover” bands, just to name a few. I’ve even had students in Klezmer ensembles and Armenian bands over the years. These students are “culture bearers”⁷ and bring expertise we can tap into to broaden and enrich our curricular offerings.

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4. Develop students' musical collaboration and musical leadership skills through small ensembles.

As stated previously, small ensembles are the most viable outlets for continued musicing for busy students and working adults. Such ensembles are also best suited for developing our students' musical collaboration and leadership skills. What we lack as a profession is a model of how to facilitate this in a room filled with large numbers of students. I recommend adopting a lab science approach.⁸

Just as in a lab science class (or visual art or wood shop for that matter) we can have several groups around the room working simultaneously with the teacher moving among them monitoring their work, answering questions and providing coaching. They can be composing, rehearsing, recording, editing, etc. We can periodically pull them together for a lecture, demonstration, assignment or for group critiques, and then send them back to work in their small groups.⁹ The key is to allow the students to be in charge of the ensembles, choose the repertoire, work musically among themselves and make the musical decisions.

5. Focus on student creativity and development of their independent musicianship.

Facilitating musical creativity and lifelong and lifewide musicing is dependent on students developing their independent musicianship. Accomplishing this is a huge challenge that deserves our greatest amount of attention and effort. We can guide them in their development as musicians through giving them tasks, assignments, projects of their own, having them form their own small ensembles and organize and run their own rehearsals, choose repertoire, write pieces for their groups etc. Our role becomes that of a coach who functions similarly to the best private lesson teachers. We ask them questions, help them learn to be critical of their work

and guide and facilitate their learning and decision-making.¹⁰

6. Connect music curricula and offerings to other curricular areas and the wider community.

There are many examples of connecting school music offerings to the wider community in the preceding examples. Therefore, I will focus here on connecting music to other curricular areas. The difference between music class and using music in other curricular areas is that in music classes students develop their musicianship and music-specific knowledge whereas in other classes they learn about music as it pertains to the subject they are studying. These are complementary ways of studying music that reinforce each other and strengthen the perceived value of both. One of our challenges as music educators is to be competent in both settings and able to clearly articulate the differences and benefits of each of them.

Connecting music to other curricular areas requires us to engage in a two-way dialogue with our colleagues. We need to ask what they are doing and how we can support them and we need to inform them of what we are doing and ask them to help us. Elementary teachers do this most regularly and perhaps more easily because their students are assigned to a single classroom teacher with whom music teachers regularly interact. At the middle and secondary levels it will require reaching out to a greater number of teachers. This is very feasible and may be the only way we can musically reach all students in the high school, thus making learning more about music meaningful and relevant to their lives. Here are some examples of how we might collaborate with colleagues throughout the school building:

Math, Physics, Technology. Remember math/physics and the vibrating string? Who better to guest lecture about Pythagoras, intervals, and acoustics than the music teacher who can

bring examples of other instruments and how they use vibrating strings, air, and other materials such as cymbals and drum heads to produce sounds? Meanwhile, the synthetic production and digital manipulation of sound might be of great interest in technology classes. Perhaps the math, physics and technology teachers can help us design projects for music classes that investigate these issues at deeper levels than time in their classes allows?

Biology. Research on music and the brain would be of great interest in biology classes. We can share a number of recent studies about music and cognition with the teachers and students.

English. There are any number of poems already used in English classes that have been set to music. We could bring recordings and scores of settings of poems they are learning in English classes and discuss how various composers emphasized key elements of poems through compositional and orchestrational choices. We could then teach text setting in music classes and have students compose music to existing poems or poems of their own.

World Languages. How about Beethoven's setting of Schiller's "*Ode an die Freude*" for German class or any number of songs in foreign languages for the corresponding classes? We can also ask the language teachers to cover texts we are working on in choir, assist with pronunciation and understanding of texts, and explain the historical and socio-political contexts in which the music was composed.

Social Studies. We could introduce music into Social Studies classes to help bring history alive and demonstrate the power and importance of music in people's lives. For example, we could introduce them to Latin American Baroque music and dispel the myth that the Baroque period occurred only in Europe and that it was prior to mass

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colonization of the Americas. We could also connect music and US history showing the American Revolution occurred during music's Classical Period and demonstrate the social power of music with civil rights protest songs. We could have students in music classes write their own songs that speak to issues of concern for them, their community, and their era, form bands to play and record them, burn CDs, and post them on the music department website as downloadable MP3s. We could also ask the social studies teacher to help our students do a musical ethnography of the community and also study the use of music in marketing and consumer manipulation.

Graphic Arts. The graphic arts teachers could help students design original artwork for student CDs and posters and advertisements for marketing their CDs and performances. Music students could reciprocate by composing music for use with graphic arts projects.

Health and Physical Education. There is a body of research on music and physical motivation that could be of interest in health and physical education classes. We could use music classes to study this phenomenon and select music to be used during class warm-ups and at sporting events.

The aforementioned are just a handful of numerous ways we can connect music to other school subjects in ways that improve learning in those areas and also help develop the musicianship of all students. We simply need to reach out, make connections with our colleagues and be willing to do some work for their classes as well as ours.

Closing

Focusing on lifelong and lifewide musicing; engaging all students musically; offering a broader variety of instruments, ensembles, and genres;

developing students' musical collaboration and musical leadership skills through small ensembles; focusing on student creativity and developing their independent musicianship; and connecting music curricula and offerings to other curricular areas and the wider community is an ambitious agenda. The schools that accomplish it will be musically dynamic and engaging.

Teaching in them will be musically rewarding and focused on helping students become musically empowered and making a difference in the community beyond the school walls. This will go far toward preparing them for a society in which individual creativity is essential, small group collaboration is the business model, and competition with workers from around the world will steadily increase.¹¹ It is an exciting time in which we music educators have a major contribution to make for the future of Pennsylvania.

I would be remiss, however, not to mention the difficulties we face. We are not a highly valued discipline in the current edu-political environment. Many decision makers and influential people have a narrow view of music education that ranges from supporters who only see the role of music education as an activity, a public relations program, or a form of cultural indoctrination, to detractors who see offering music as too expensive or of little to no value at all. Our constant need for advocacy is a direct result of having failed to make music education relevant for them and the vast majority of Americans while we had them in music classes during their youth. We have a chance now to correct our past mistakes and make sure we never again graduate a generation with this marginal view of music in schools.

We must redouble our efforts to regain relevance for music education. The recommendations of the seminar participants, both in their 90 specific recommendations and the 6 broader strands into which I have organized them

here, are focal points on which to orient our curricular reformation. Working together, with each of us doing something musically progressive in every school, we can and will succeed in providing a relevant and modern music education for all the children of Pennsylvania and contribute to its revitalization in our current creative economy and the coming creative society.¹²

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Footnotes

¹Patrick M. Jones, "PMEA Toward the Future: Serving the Musical Needs of All Pennsylvanians in a Changing World Environment," *PMEA News*, Fall - September 2005.

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²Bruce Katz, Amy Liu et al, "Back to Prosperity: A Competitive Agenda for Renewing Pennsylvania," (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution Center of Urban and Metropolitan Policy, 2003).

³For research on the power of the arts to revitalize communities see Mark Stern, and Susan Seifert, "Culture Builds Community Evaluation: Summary Report," (Philadelphia: Social Impact of the Arts Project, University of Pennsylvania School of Social Work, 2002). and Patrick M. Jones, "Music Education and the Knowledge Economy: Developing Creativity, Strengthening Communities," *Arts Education Policy Review* 106, no. 4 (2005). for specific recommendations for music education. For extensive discussion of the need for creativity to salvage the US economy and the development of a creative society see Richard Florida, *The Flight of the Creative Class: The New Global Competition for Talent* (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 2005).

⁴"...the core issues we face today: focusing on lifelong and lifewide music; engaging all students musically; offering a broader variety of instruments, ensembles, and genres; developing students' musical collaboration and musical leadership skills through small ensembles; focusing on student creativity and developing their independent musicianship; and connecting music curricula and offerings to other curricular areas and the wider community." Jones, "PMEA Toward the Future: Serving the Musical Needs of All Pennsylvanians in a Changing World Environment.", 32.

⁵Patrick M. Jones, "In a World of Musics, How Do You Decide Which Ones to Teach?: A Response to Ann Clements" (paper presented at the PMEA In-Service Conference, Hershey, PA, 2005).

⁶To bring experts to school we can use existing budgeted funds or write a grant application and submit it to the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts (www.pacouncilonthearts.org). Their Arts in Education program is designed specifically to fund bringing working artists into schools to do collaborative projects with teachers. The application process is not as daunting as it seems. There are also other grant opportunities once one begins digging around a bit.

⁷Culture Bearers is the description used by ethnomusicologists to identify indigenous members of a culture who can teach others about it with first-person knowledge.

⁸Jones, "Music Education and the Knowledge Economy: Developing Creativity, Strengthening Communities."

⁹For user-friendly models on a music lab approach see Thomas A. Regelski, *Teaching General Music in Grades 4-8: A Musicianship Approach* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2004). and Ronald B. Thomas, *M.M.C.P. Synthesis* (Americole, 1970).

¹⁰An educational model for music that focuses on developing student musical decision-making is Arts PROPEL. See Ellen Winner, Lyle Davidson, and Larry Scripp, ed., *Arts Propel: A Handbook for Music* (Educational Testing Service and the President and Fellows of Harvard College, 1992).

¹¹Jones, "PMEA. Toward the Future: Serving the Musical Needs of All Pennsylvanians in a Changing World Environment."

¹²For research on the declining state of Pennsylvania see Katz, "Back to Prosperity: A Competitive Agenda for Renewing Pennsylvania." For research on the power of the arts to revitalize communities see Stern, "Culture Builds Community Evaluation: Summary Report." and Jones, "Music Education and the

Knowledge Economy: Developing Creativity, Strengthening Communities." for specific recommendations for music education. Finally, for extensive discussion of the need for creativity to salvage the US economy and the development of a creative society see Florida, *The Flight of the Creative Class: The New Global Competition for Talent*.

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