Music education advocates mobilize to ensure that no arts are left behind.

A mere 2,500 or so years ago, music was an exalted part of the school curriculum—right up there with gymnastics. Both were considered essential to a full education, and no less an authority than Plato said so. But no longer. Music education has slipped to the periphery in many schools, and has all but disappeared in others. Since the 1970s, when thousands of music programs disappeared virtually overnight from public schools nationwide, many communities have seen some restoration of school music education. But that progress has come piecemeal. There is little consistency from one district to another, from one state to another, and from one year to another. A district that funds music relatively generously one year may cut it severely the next. Orchestras have responded to the fluctuations with expanded education programs. But even as their offerings have grown by more than tenfold in the last 25 years, it has become obvious that orchestras and other music groups cannot replace whole curricula; their programs are most effective when pursued in tandem with an ongoing course of music instruction run by the local school district. Today, as more orchestras undergo long-term and strategic planning, concern over the fragile state of music education is growing. Its implications for the present and future health of orchestras have sent a new priority from the wings to center stage: education advocacy.
Concern over the fragile state of music education has sent a new priority from the wings to center stage: education advocacy.

Why should orchestras take on this responsibility? As Charlotte Symphony Education Director Susan Miville says, “I want art for art’s sake, but without kids in the hall, everything is lost.” Children, whether or not they receive grounding in music at school, eventually grow up to be community citizens and leaders; and the local orchestra will quickly cease to be a point of civic pride or a dwindling sector of the community appreciates its efforts.

Audience motivation research conducted by the American Symphony Orchestra League in 2001 found that the average concertgoer had significant experience with music before age fourteen, and that 75 percent of the current audience had an opportunity to study an instrument—even if it was just a few months on the trombone in sixth grade. Unlike reading, playing soccer, or eating fine food, an interest in classical music seems to go into a long period of latency in early adulthood, before emerging once again after years of broadening and child-rearing. But this generally happens only if the spark was kindled during the school-age years.

And the payoffs aren’t immediate, either: the National Endowment for the Arts 2002 Survey of Public Participation in the Arts found that the average age of classical concertgoers has held steady in the mid-50s for many years. The logical hypothesis that more music teachers in the schools will produce more people in the concert hall, unfortunately, would require decades of research to prove: Without decades to watch orchestras have little choice but to advocate.

Demanding Accountability

Exactly what is music education advocacy? It’s educating all the constituents of your orchestra—musicians, staff, board, volunteers, audience—about policies and legislation that may negatively impact their children and the orchestra. It’s informing local, state, and national decision makers about the importance of music education and involving local policy makers about the orchestra and its mission. Mark Slavkin, vice president for education at the Los Angeles Music Center, says that orchestras now have to see school boards as an audience for their advocacy.

It’s a new concept to many. Most orchestras have activated themselves around a crisis at the NEA’s or state-funding levels. But they need to understand, Slavkin says, that their school-based education programs effectively make them partners in a school district that is governed by an elected school board. However small that district (and New Jersey alone has more than 600 districts), public influence can make a huge difference in what is provided in schools.

Our nation has grown increasingly diverse, and classical music represents just one slice of the huge musical and cultural pie available to today’s children. Classic music is no longer prominent in mass media, as it was when Leonard Bernstein enchanted so many television viewers or when Beverly Sills was enough of a household name to be credibly host The Tonight Show. Many of today’s corporate and media moguls have little background in music and the arts; they, as children, lost out on the stimulating budget axe sliced through arts programs in public schools, just around the time Sills was on TV.

There’s a brand-new concern, too. All schools, including the suburban school districts that managed to avoid many of the cuts during urban districts were able to develop excellent music programs, are now likely to be affected by an Act of Congress that is changing the face of public education across the fifty states. The “No Child Left Behind Act” (NCLB) was passed in 2001 and dictates national policy for elementary and secondary schools. Because the Act is to the basis for most federal funding to schools, its potential impact is huge. NCLB’s definition of core academic subjects includes reading, math, and science but does not mandate standardized testing in arts other than literacy, math, and science.

Therein lies the problem for music education, and by extension, the arts. In March of this year, the Center on Education Policy released what is probably the most comprehensive national study on the impact of NCLB to date. One of the four key challenges identified by the 49 states and 314 school districts in the study was a narrowing of the curriculum in order to increase the amount of mandatory time spent on reading and math. In New Jersey’s Bayonne School District, for example, the number and availability of art and music programs has been cut back and field trips put on hold for many months. Academic Apology, a report released in 2004 by the Council on Basic Education, shows significant decreases in instructional time for the arts, especially in schools serving primarily minorities. And The Sound of Silence, a 2004 report from the Center for Arts Education at All Foundation, showed that reductions in music education funding and priorities.

Consider the climate in which orchestras are operating. Music education funding and priorities are changing at the local, state, and federal levels. The T onight Show

The Sound of Silence

Not literally of course! But let’s music bring the best vocal qualities to your audience.

Proud Music of the Storm (2002) for SATB Chorus & Orchestra

Pride included excerpts from Walt Whitman’s poem from Leaves of Grass, commissioned and premiered by Vancouver Bach Choir with assistance from CBC Radio and BG Arts Council.

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Education advocacy is a complicated and continuous job that works best when orchestras join with educators and other arts groups to accomplish their aims, as these stories from New York City and Dallas demonstrate. They tell of success and frustration, a tremendous commitment of goodwill and resources, and a sense of community connection that pays intangible dividends.

New York: Blueprint for Learning

Last September, amid great fanfare, New York City’s Department of Education announced a new music and art curriculum for the district’s 1.1 million students in grades K through 12. It was a proud moment for the schools, cultural institutions, teachers, and teaching artists who had collectively designed the curriculum over the previous year. The Blueprint for Teaching and Learning in the Arts, as it is known, is the concrete embed- ment of sixteen years of arts partnership in New York City. Back in 1977, when Mayor Abe Beame virtually eliminated the budget for arts education in pub- lic schools, he created a vacuum that New York City’s Department of Education—under a modern incarnation of Stephen F. Austin, the “father” of Texas (“Isn’t he dead yet?” asked one young audience member.) ArtsPartners funds go to the lead teachers who are partners in the program, and the partnership provides professional development, resource needs, and leadership training. Students get arts access and a broader, more meaningful way to absorb core-curriculum lessons. Teachers get support in providing that

New York: Arts in Education Roundtable

The Blueprint is the ultimate fruit of those efforts. In it, the arts are given importance second only to math and literacy. According to Nancy Shankman and Thomas Cabaniss, who directed the creation of the music curricu- lum, their committee, in the spirit of the Arts Roundtable, comprised equal representation from the schools and the cultural community. (Shankman was music supervisor at the New York City Department of Education, and Cabaniss was Kahn’s success- or as director of education for the New York Philharmonic. Both have since moved on to other positions.) Having worked closely together since 2002, Shankman and Cabaniss used their relation- ship as a model in addressing head-on the disconnect between educators and cultural organiza- tors. Music teachers, they recall, felt nervous that their positions would be usurped by members of the cultural community— who, in turn, didn’t realize that many music teachers were themselves practicing musicians. Shankman herself says she had a “180-degree turnaround” in her previously judgmental attitude toward cultural organizations. The Blueprint’s first year of implementation, Shankman admits, has revealed some weak- nesses. “Teachers are slow to use community and cultural resources and to make cultural connections,” she says, and con- versely, cultural institutions aren’t paying enough attention to the needs of teachers, accord- ing to Cabaniss. “I had a dream that [the Blueprint] would begin to influence the way education departments at the major cul- tural organizations would pro- gram their repertoire” for educa- tion events. “That hasn’t really happened. Programming still seems to be independent.”
The mayoral election in November 2005 presents an unknown for the Blueprint’s future, since new administra- tions can bring shifts in educa- tional priorities. Moreover, none of the ten regional arts supervi- sors in New York City is a music specialist. But “this is our best shot,” says Shankman, who is now a music education professor at New York University. She plans to introduce the Blueprint to col- leagues at other state and pri- vate teacher-training institutions and strongly believes that the only way forward is through grassroots advocacy. Cabaniss, now music animator for The Philadelphia Orchestra, agrees: “The more this is done at the grassroots level, the more diffi- cult it is to undo.”

Dallas: Partners for Access

The director of education for the Dallas Symphony has been advocat- ing for better arts education for at least the sixteen years she’s been with the DSO. She recalls a time in Dallas when “each ele- mentary school had the choice of an art or music teacher”—and that was about as far as it went. Today, a public-private part- nership called Dallas ArtsPart- ners spends between $6 and $15 for every one of the 160,000 plus elementary students in the Dallas ISD (as the School Dis- trict, the twelfth-largest in the nation. Every school in the dis- trict receives access to programs of any of 60 cultural partners, of which the DSO is one. Teachers can choose from an online data- base of offerings and plan their curriculum accordingly. “We’ve come a long way,” Binford says. Dallas ArtsPartners owes its existence to sustained and cooper- ative advocacy for arts educa- tion. A consortium involving the School District, the Office of Cul- tural Affairs, Young Audiences of North Texas, and dozens of local arts organizations, Dallas ArtsPartners grew from informal meetings of arts leaders and morphed into a consolidated communication channel among the city’s arts groups. Binford recalls a school board meeting when members of Dallas ArtsPartners filled three rows as their spokesperson argued against the elimination of arts teachers in elementary schools. “Those teachers considered the consortium as pivotal to their ultimate success,” she says.

Education Roundtable

It was strategic planning by the city’s cultural commission that prompted the registration of Dallas ArtsPartners in 1998. A study commissioned as part of the process revealed that “only 25 percent of children, and those mostly from the more affluent areas, were participating” in city- funded arts education, according to Giselle Antoni, then Young Audiences’ executive director. Both the cultural commissioners and the School District saw the inequity as unacceptable—“separ- ism for children,” as Antoni puts it. Striving for equity became the partnership’s primary goal. She recalls, “What would it take to ensure that every kid had access?”

ArtsPartners’ support means that every teacher who walks into Meyerson Symphony Center has embedded the day’s Dallas Symphony youth concert into the class curriculum.

New York’s Arts in Education Roundtable worked consistently to improve arts education. The Blueprint is the ultimate fruit of those efforts.

COLLABORATIONS MOVE ARTS EDUCATION ADVOCACY FORWARD.

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three- or four-week lesson cycle. A youth concert last fall included music from different nations that helped settle Texas, including France, the Czech Republic, Mex-ico, Germany, and Spain, as well as Native American and African-American music; and was nar- rated by a modern incarnation of Stephen F. Austin, the “father” of Texas. (“Isn’t he dead yet?” asked one young audience member.)

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NZAUGUST 2005
Partner
Recognize that the orchestra is only a conservative Republican, who gave arts education a huge boost when he made it the platform for his two-year term as chairman of the Education Commission of the States, which aims to improve state policy in all areas of education. Huckabee is the policy group’s 40th chair (his term began in July 2004), but the first to propose arts education as the focus. He’s already set an example in Arkansas by revising state law to ensure that elementary schools offer a minimum of 40 minutes’ instruction in music and another 40 minutes of visual art each week—to every student. Political advocates like Huckabee are valuable—and rare, especially at the local level. But orchestras don’t have to do it all, says Watts. In fact, they may be most effective in music education advocacy when they work in collaboration with school teachers, parents, and other arts groups. Take inspiration from the stories of collaborative advocacy in these pages, and peruse these ten pointers for launching your own music education advocacy effort:

1. Recognize that the most effective advocacy is local, not national. While national service organizations like the American Symphony Orchestra League can make waves in Washington, education is a local issue, not a global one. Advocacy is about local politics. Your school board or city’s elected officials, they should want to hear from their very own community citizens—including their orchestra—and they won’t change education policy based on outside recommendations. Use League resources and advice to build your case—and then go make it.

2. Engage your musicians, staff, and board in your education advocacy efforts. Board should be an integral part of the organization, not a machine you crank up only when there is a funding crunch. The members of the orchestra family are also, presumably, concerned community citizens. They are all affected when children don’t get enough music exposure in school. When they successful advocate for more, they will feel the benefits. At the Pittsburgh Symphony, musicians have bought into advocacy completely, according to Suzanne Perino, vice-president of education and community engagement. “They come to us with concerns about music at their own children’s schools,” she says. “They speak at school board meetings.” A lack of arts education, she adds, is “frustrating to those of them who graduated from area schools.”

3. Start an advocacy coalition now. Partners with other arts organizations, local funders, arts agencies, and, most important, school districts. You need have in common only one thing: that you want better music education in your schools. Where to begin? Almost all orchestras are already involved to some extent in their communities. So use the relationships you already have to build a coalition. Existing program partnerships provide a great basis for advocacy, because they cement relationships, extend your network, and show results that you can use in persuading policy makers. See “On the Front Lines,” page 56, for examples of advocacy partnerships in New York and Dallas, both involving orchestras from the beginning. Although these are large urban environments, education advocacy is just as important in smaller communities, if not more so. Their orchestras may have some of the strongest local connections, and comparatively greater influence on school districts than orchestras in large cities.

4. Recognize that the orchestra is only part of the puzzle. Discipline-based factions break down advocacy efforts very quickly. Policy makers and the general public are less likely than arts insiders to see the differences among music, art, drama, and dance. What does make a difference is when arts educators and arts presenters—including orchestras—work together. So keep it cordial and convivial. Be sensitive to the needs of others in your coalition, especially the schools.

All schools are now likely to be affected by an Act of Congress that is changing the face of public education across the 50 states: the No Child Left Behind Act. New orchestras have been disproportionately impacted by it, starting with Congress’s mandate to cut back on music and arts education programs to make room for math and science. But orchestras aren’t just another subject. They are priorities for over half the states mandate the use of standards, to be implemented at the district level; the remainder make them voluntary. To date, only a handful of states have incorporated them into their accountability systems.

How to influence the others in the same direction? You guessed it: “Advocacy,” says Watts. Art of Persuasion Watts is the author of No Subject Left Behind, a resource guide for education advocates that is the result of a collaborative effort among several national arts and education organizations. One of them, the Arts Education Partnership, has been helping to steer local, state, and federal policy around to arts education. It’s a national forum representing more than 100 educational, philanthropic, business, arts, and government entities. By facilitating a dialogue at the national level and identifying best practices in arts education reform, it represents more than 60 different research projects in the arts, including fifteen in music. (Both reports are available at www.aep-arts.org.)

Watts points out that, unlike most other policy groups, the Arts Education Partnership, has been helping to steer local, state, and federal policy around to arts education. It’s a national forum representing more than 100 educational, philanthropic, business, arts, and government entities. By facilitating a dialogue at the national level and identifying best practices in arts education reform, it represents more than 60 different research projects in the arts, including fifteen in music. (Both reports are available at www.aep-arts.org.)

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5. **Make new friends.** Get to know your policy makers. Really get to know them, including their personal interests. You might be surprised to find enthusiasms that haven’t been tapped for advocacy. That superintendent that you saw as a bureau- crat may sing with great gusto in a community chorus. The chairman of the school board, who may seem distant and unap- proachable, may have played the piano since kindergarten. Find out. Then work from that knowledge.

6. **Use online resources.** Support-Music.com is one of several web resources available to advocates. (See “Advocacy Resources,” page 54.) It simplifies the advocacy process by helping the user to build a customized case for music education, step by step—starting with the suggestion that you “Set up a small and enthusiastic team, and ask each team member to develop a network of helpers.” Check the Government Affairs pages of the League’s web site often (www.symphony.org/govaff/what/index.shtml). You’ll find regular alerts and news on legislation affecting orchestras and arts funding, as well as a section on Music Education Advocacy.

7. **Use current research to build your case.** Research that demonstrates the positive influence of the arts on academic performance can get you the ear of a policy maker, even if the point you want to make about the benefits of music is much more complex. Get a foot in the door with facts gleaned from the online and published literature. (See “Advocacy Resources,” page 54.)

8. **Advocate for better data on student participation in music.** Although there is research to support your case that music education improves learning in general, there is little information about how much music education is provided locally, statewide, or nationally. These facts will help you establish a baseline for improvement. So encourage your school board to provide accurate student participation data for music courses at individual schools and at the district level. The National Assessment of Educational Progress Arts Report Card, which assesses the arts knowledge and skills of eighth graders, was last undertaken in 1997 and the next is not due until 2008. The most recent information on the provision of music teachers in schools is the 1999-2000 report, *Arts Education in the Public Elementary and Secondary Schools*, by the National Center for Education Statistics (www.nces.ed.gov). The League has been advocating for another report of this kind, so that orchestras can have some comparative data.

9. **When there is a crisis, seize the moment.** Jumpstart your network and get advocacy moving. And don’t be afraid to use technology to make your case. When the California State Arts Council was slated for elimination two years ago, arts advocates immediately set up a web site allowing concerned citizens to e-mail messages and letters directly to their representatives in the state legislature, as well as to the pertinent committee chairman, ranking members, and the governor. Concerned arts groups, including the Los Angeles Philharmonic, forwarded the site’s URL to their databases of supporters. The strategy was quick and effective. Although its budget was slashed, the Arts Council was saved.

10. **Hang in there.** All successful coalitions need a period of incubation. Longevity and consistency of leadership will make a big difference. Most successful coalitions include members of a decade’s standing or more. Above all, don’t become discouraged or apathetic if you’re not successful the first time around. And when you do meet with success, don’t become complacent! Keep on making that case.

Karin Brookes is editor of Tempo, published by WRTI in Philadelphia, and has written for *The Philadelphia Inquirer, Classical Music* (UK), and The Voice (Chorus America).

*Orchestras may be most effective in music education advocacy when they work in collaboration with school teachers, parents, and other arts groups.*