

Selling Out the Future: An Open Letter to the Franklin Area School Board

An open letter by August Dombrow

November 14, 2008

I can still remember my first music lessons: three times a week my music teacher patiently sat by as I blew haphazardly into the mouthpiece of my new clarinet, financed through a local music shop. These one-on-one sessions supplemented frequent after-school band practices, a cacophonous blend of woodwinds, brass, and percussion. Eventually the sounds began to blend together – at least enough so that parents could force a smile at the winter concert, listening as their fifth- and-sixth grade children alternately struggled to keep in tempo and remember their respective parts. I eventually quit concert band in middle school, after only three years, but I never quit my pursuit of music, having studied guitar and piano in the meantime. In this way, I have developed a high regard for elementary music programs, which is why I was disturbed to learn of my younger sister's own diluted music regimen.

Young enough to have no recollection of my own brief flirtation with the instrument, my sister began studying clarinet for fifth grade concert band. Only, instead of the immersive environment I was exposed to, she receives 30 minutes of personal instruction once per week. Optional group sessions, conducted twice per week after school for a half-hour, supplement the one-on-one instruction but do not provide the same degree of individually tailored training. Additionally, the band meets as a whole only in the weeks immediately leading up to a concert conducted once or twice in the course of the school year. Based on these observations, I can only conclude that, in the decade separating us, shifting priorities have led to a declining emphasis on elementary music education. According to fifteen years of scientific discourse, this is a trend that needs reversed.

In 1993 Dr. Gordon Shaw, alongside Dr. Frances Rauscher developed the “Mozart effect” experiments in which they established a causal relationship between music and spatial-temporal reasoning, our faculty to process information using mental images that evolve in space and time (not to be confused with the media-hyped product lines of the same name which recklessly exaggerated the results of these experiments) (Shaw 33). In the experiment college students were exposed to ten minutes of a Mozart piece which boosted scores on a test administered immediately afterwards. Their study provided the genesis for more recent research linking music to brain development, especially efforts to measure the impact of musical instruction on our intelligence and capacity for learning.

Many of these attempts have yielded similarly interesting (and consequently promising) results. A few examples include:

- Another Rauscher experiment in 1998 tested the hypotheses on mice, confirming a link between music and intelligence – one that cannot be explained away by cultural preferences (American Music Conference).
- A 2004 study revealed an increase in IQ after young students received nine months of voice or piano training (Schellenberg 512).
- Research that compared schools with music programs and those without, finding that students with musical instruction fared better on both math and reading assessments, regardless of socioeconomic status (Johnson 293).
- A 2004 Stanford University study revealed a relationship between musical proficiency and improved spoken language capabilities (MENC).

Research on the topic is extensive, and a common theme emerges when examined together: exposure to and instruction in music yields promising results compared with control groups. While the nature or extent of this relationship may still be debated, professionally conducted research indicates that a causal relationship does, in fact, exist between musical instruction and increased academic performance, especially for our youth.

Additional studies have shown that an education in the arts “contribute[s] to lower recidivism rates; increased self-esteem; the acquisition of job skills; and the development of much needed creative thinking, problem solving and communications skills” amongst under-privileged youth (National Governor’s Association). By striking music and other arts programs from the curriculum, we deprive many of those children their only access to otherwise unaffordable alternatives, such as private instructors.

Beyond all of the statistics and figures lie the intangible benefits of any social activity. A child learns discipline, increased self-esteem, and reward for personal development as well as cooperation in larger ensembles. Music is not just memorizing scales and technical performance, either; they learn expression – to translate a written piece into their own terms, much as one might do with a foreign language. Musical lexicon, such as keys, intervals, or tempo is meaningless jargon until interpreted by the performer. Our society tends to view organized sports as an opportunity for children to learn life lessons in perseverance and teamwork; music education offers an invaluable experience in these terms.

Despite compelling evidence, schools continue to cut budgets, staff, and time committed to their music programs, meanwhile subjecting their students to repetitive drills in preparation for state assessments. This link would suggest that the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 might be to blame. Citing a lack of empirical evidence directly linking the law to a decline in arts education in public schools, one researcher conducted a thorough study in order to address this concern. The results of Cydney Spohn’s careful research ultimately connect the neglect of arts education to complications instigated by NCLB: as time and effort for tested subject increases, arts programs like music are victims of perennial cuts (5).

In Title IX, Part A, Section 9101 (11), the law explicitly states that the term “core academic subject” includes arts education, yet somehow the arts, including music, continue to suffer in what can only be described as dogmatic devotion to

math, reading, and science. In execution, the law reads: quantifiable results equal federal funding, and assessment tests equal quantifiable results. Whether the problem derives from poor legislation with good intentions, poor interpretations, or budget constraints (which may or may not be attributed to poor legislation), the implications are the same: our schools sacrifice quality education, of which music and the arts play an integral role, for short-term gains in assessment scores.

If we honestly wish to improve the overall quality of public education, evidence indicates we should be moving in the opposite direction: more music education, not less. Instead of running our youth through repetitious mock assessment drills, that time could be better spent learning the foundations of music, developing that spatial-temporal reasoning. Properly cultivated, those results translate into better math and science scores, and the child learns the concepts versus the rote memorization inherent in current methods. Balanced with current language-analytic techniques of instruction (those based on human language and equations), music education offers advancement in other academic areas (Shaw 19). As scientific data and personal anecdotes touting the value of music education stack up, the current direction of public schools reveals a disturbing trend of indifference or, worse, willful negligence in some policy makers.

I understand compromise dictates school policy, a delicate balance between budgeting and meeting federal/state mandates. And I understand that in a post-NCLB system, sacrifices must be made or suffer more drastic consequences imposed by the federal government. Unfortunately, not enough has been said in defense of music education, and I hope to add one more voice to those committed to a broad curriculum – one that includes music. This is not a request to gamble school funds on unproven methods; it is a plea to continue investing in programs that promise to contribute to the development of productive members of our society.

As a benefactor and concerned citizen, I only ask that we make a responsible decision after carefully and exhaustively considering all of the facts. Please, do not let Franklin make this proverbial Deal with the Devil, trading quality education for satisfactory assessment scores. We must remain committed to providing future generations of Franklin graduates with a fulfilling education experience.

Thank you for your time,

August G. Dombrow