

How *do* you know? How *will* you know?

by Dave Weatherred, WMEA President, March 2006

I once was asked to run a rehearsal with a music ensemble that I had just heard perform a fairly complicated program. As we began to delve into the music, I realized quickly that this group had learned the entire performance by rote! Most of them could not read music and would only be successful if all music was presented to them in this same manner.

This is an extreme example of a problem we all face!

A key issue continues to rear its head as I travel around the state discussing the state arts requirement and assessments. It is the struggle between teaching the individual child musical concepts and producing quality ensembles. The reality is that the education of the individual child loses priority and importance as they move from elementary to middle school to high school. Actually, even in the earliest grades, many educators don't attempt to discover what each individual music student has learned. Those who truly have made it a priority to teach individuals still often struggle with the apparent dichotomy between teaching the ensemble and the individual. What will it take to get at the heart of this issue?

I would assume most of us teaching at the K-12 level would agree the hope is that as many students as possible would continue with music through high school (and beyond). With this in mind, the focus of this section will be on the high school program, but the concerns and solutions apply to all levels. To start - if I were to ask what statements would define a quality high school music program, I would expect many of the following answers:

- Quality large ensembles with many supporting equally strong small ensembles (jazz band and choir, chamber orchestra, etc.)
- Success at festivals and contests
- Large numbers of students in the program
- High visibility in the community
- A high percentage of students taking private lessons
- Ability for the ensembles to perform music at a high "rigor" level (in relation to the size of the school)

All of these aspects are legitimate indicators and do describe a quality "ensemble" music program. What might be more important about this list is that, in most cases, it is also what principals would like to see in their music programs (with the possible addition of an exciting pep band willing to perform at the majority of sporting events!?).

In addition, the experience of being part of an excellent ensemble can be life-changing. It has its own intrinsic value, and students will often remember many of their peak experiences in these groups for a lifetime. I am a true believer in the ensemble method of teaching music.

The question becomes: Is the "experience" enough?

Should only students who find other outlets for their musical education outside of our classrooms, such as private lessons and youth orchestras, be expected to learn advanced (high school level) music concepts? Should we pat ourselves on the back when a student who has taken private lessons for many years succeeds in music, but blame the student when another has sat in our program for years and learned very little?

We have students who will participate in music programs from kindergarten through high school. Just at the secondary level, a student could have up to six years of multiple music classes. This could easily result in 1,500 to 2,000 hours or more that the student has been somehow involved in an ensemble music education program (from 7th to 12th grade). Is it fair to the child to only give him an “experience” in a music ensemble for this length of time, or do we owe him an education in music concepts and skills, arts processes, communication through the arts and arts connections to the world he will live in as an adult?

This brings us to a second question: Should the list describing a quality music program, *also* include the following?

All students that have participated in the music program through to their senior year will have the following knowledge:

- Ability to read and write music
- Basic knowledge of chord structure and form
- Audience conventions
- Music (arts) processes
- Ability to convey personal feelings and ideas through music
- Basic cultural and historical music (arts) knowledge
-

Wouldn't having an ensemble made up of individuals well on their way to achieving this knowledge base also help assure a quality ensemble?

Wouldn't 60 or more of these students sitting in front of you save hours of rehearsal time? What changes would have to take place in a music program to develop this type of student?

Or - taking a different tack:

How do you know if the 10th chair clarinetist, the alto in the middle of a section of 20, or the second violinist sitting at the stand in the third row has learned all of this? How do you assure that your students aren't just very good at following your directions or following the person next to them playing or singing the same part? A good ear can make reading music almost unnecessary in this scenario. The obvious answer is you have to assess them!

An assessment can be as simple as a question posed during a rehearsal or as complicated as a set of CBPAs from the state. Both ends of the spectrum have great value. The easiest change to this kind of assessment model is; instead of telling a student what he/she is doing wrong as he/she reads through the classroom music, the student should be asked what has been missed in the music. Questions about “why” the composer included an expressive marking or rhythmic style will also be very effective for deep learning. Questioning should be undertaken as often as possible. This simple step will start each student down the road of taking a personal interest in his/her own musical knowledge.

Nothing to fear

Directors should also embrace, and not be fearful of, the state assessments. They are for your benefit and cover a wide range of the concepts including those listed above. These assessments are designed to measure individual knowledge. It will take a concerted effort to fit the CBPAs into your existing program, but it should be well worth the effort.

You and your students will become much better informed about both strengths and weaknesses in your music program, your teaching and in their learning.

Of course, the traditional individual playing or singing test will also inform the director about the knowledge the student has acquired, but it will be of fairly low rigor if the grading only takes into consideration wrong notes or rhythms. This style of assessment will not necessarily expose whether or not the student can read music. Weak readers are usually very good at memorizing playing tests. On the other hand, a state or local assessment asking the students to write measures of music and then play or sing them back will show if the students can read music.

No matter what is expected of us by the community or administration, as educators of young musicians we should care about whether or not each student leaves our program with an education in music. We should be excited about the student who might not have had access to private lessons but still leaves (as a graduating senior) with the ability to continue in music, either as a vocation or avocation; and without the roadblocks of poor musical knowledge and skills. This student who has the ability to continue in music has become what the EALRs refer to as an independent musician (2.2 - benchmark three). We should be even more excited when the student listed above is not a rarity but represents the majority of students that have had the honor of being in our music program! When this is the case, we truly are the professional music educators we strive to be.