



Banding Together to Weather Tough Times

by Scott C. Shuler, MENC President



Weatherproofing Music Education

Photo by Jenna Wedge

At some point, most of us have jokingly thanked someone for arranging good weather for an event, such as a picnic or wedding. Such mock gratitude is amusing because everyone knows that weather is beyond our control.

When it comes to creating the climate in *education*, however, it is possible to identify who is calling the shots, and, for good or ill, the winds that buffet us increasingly originate outside our local communities. For music educators and those they teach, the results of this change have been anything but amusing.

Students in far too many schools endure cold, gray days of endless test drills, deprived of opportunities to bask in the warm light of music and other essential (but untested) core subjects. Knowing that today's children must be prepared to surf the tsunami of globalization as adults, no thoughtful educator would reduce opportunities for students to create and perform at high levels of excellence, to communicate their ideas, to collaborate effectively in teams, to learn about other cultures or participate in their own—all of which are twenty-first-century skills taught in music classes (www.p21.org). So why are children's needs so often dismissed?

Unfortunately, politicians—not educators—seem to have grabbed the wave machine and have decided that only a hurricane can wash education clean. Worse yet, the greatest disruption is being generated by politicians at the federal level, who are farthest removed from the storms their policies stir up.

We owe it to our students to build a secure and seaworthy ark for music education, lest children's needs be swept away in a flood of unregulated, narrowly focused charter schools and standardized tests. This column is about how you can help.

Three Advocacy Levels: Climate, Weather, and Roof

MENC: The National Association for Music Education is not only America's strongest champion for creating a positive music education climate at the federal level; it also is the *only* music educator organization that has a significant federal presence and influence. The quality of MENC's staff and the dedication of volunteer music educators, including the division and national officers who serve on the national executive board, have enabled MENC to take a leadership role in major arts education initiatives, including the development of National Standards for Music Education. The following are just a few of the goals MENC has been pursuing to improve the climate for music education at the state and local levels:

- Ensuring that Congress strengthens its designation of music and the

other arts as "core subjects" when it revises and reauthorizes the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (the law known during the Bush administration as No Child Left Behind). Along with obvious advocacy benefits, being "core" also requires schools to have "highly qualified" (i.e., certified) music teachers and makes music projects eligible for federal funding.

- Pushing the U.S. Department of Education to make its grants available for music education research and professional development.
- Reworking federal laws and regulations to make local schools and districts accountable for the quality and quantity of music instruction they offer.
- Creating and publishing a "21st Century Skills Map" (see http://www.p21.org/documents/P21_arts_map_final.pdf) that illustrates how music education prepares students for college and careers.

Just as MENC's actions influence the overall national climate for music education, music education associations (MEAs) help change the weather at the state level. For example, some MEAs have pushed their legislatures to enact or expand high school graduation requirements in the arts. In other states, MEAs have supported requirements that all students receive music instruction through grade 8, or music assessments that hold schools accountable for music learning.

Regardless of the climate and weather, teachers at the local level must build a

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firm foundation and a stormproof “roof” for music education so they can buttress their programs against the gale-force winds of misguided education reform and the acid rain of recession. The single best protection for any music program is high-quality teaching that engages and educates the largest possible number of students, from preschool right up through the high school level.

Just as MENC strengthens its relationship with Congress and the U.S. Department of Education, and state MEAs develop relationships with legislators and their state departments of education, so also must teachers constantly cultivate positive relationships with their school administrators, colleagues, and community to build local support for music programs. For us to achieve the goal of quality music education for all, the three levels of advocacy must support one another:

- When economic times stress school budgets, music teachers draw on advocacy resources provided by MENC and their MEAs—including the powerful information they can find at supportmusic.com—to fight cuts that would lower the quality of their students’ music education.
- Conversely, it is imperative that music teachers and their cadre of local arts education supporters respond when MENC or their MEA alerts them to the need for phone calls, e-mails, or other action to support music/arts education at the federal and state levels.

Only Unified Are We Strong

MENC is *the* critically important umbrella organization for music education in our nation. It is the only music organization with a strong national presence that affects the climate for music education. It is also the only organization that brings our field together across all grade levels—preK through postgraduate—and all specialties. That is why I and so many others have invested our time as volunteers for MENC and MEA activities, and why every music teacher should be a member of MENC.

Music teachers understand better than anyone the importance of working in ensembles. In fact, music provides the very metaphors our society uses to describe collaboration. For example, we urge others to “get on the bandwagon.” After all, if we are “all singing from the same sheet of music,” there is no need to “preach to the choir.” Music educators also know that an ensemble produces a much bigger sound when its members are in tune with each other.

Unfortunately, people like to divide themselves into ever-smaller subgroups, a tendency sometimes referred to as “balkanization.” While I am among the many music teachers who have benefitted from joining specialized music organizations that focus on a narrow subset of our field—such as string or choral music, or a particular approach to general music—we must also maintain our connection to the mainstream of music education. Abraham Lincoln, paraphrasing the New Testament, wisely warned that “a house divided against itself cannot stand.” Membership in MENC plays a uniquely

important role in ensuring a future for our work in schools.

MENC is our nation’s single unifying, all-encompassing music education organization. Although currently “the weather outside is frightful,” we cannot afford to just sit back and “let it snow.” Passivity inevitably leads to loss; active involvement is essential for success. Our member dues and participation as volunteers in the activities of MENC and its affiliated state MEAs help ensure that students across the United States and beyond will continue to receive “a comprehensive education that includes music taught by exemplary music educators.”

Together, and only together, in the words of the famous gospel hymn, “*WE shall overcome.*”

Looking Ahead

“Seven Guiding Principles for Music/Arts Education” that outline the foundation of music education for life.



Dr. Louis Hall - The University of Maine

A Great Start For Young Oboists

This instructional DVD presents the start-up details for oboe instruction in an interactive format. It is designed for non-oboiist teachers as well as beginners on the instrument. Clear verbal, visual, and audio examples take the mystery out of how the oboe works and what one must know and do to play it well. Louie Hall’s techniques for the teaching of beginning oboists have proven very effective, and are presented in a most comprehensible way. Learn everything from assembly to embouchure, hand positioning, breathing, playing high and low, tricks for finger action and more. This chapter-by-chapter approach will help any teacher or student through the challenging first steps.

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