

It's Not Working. Let's fix it.



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I wrote this because I won't stay silent.

Over a hundred years ago, music education reform was spreading across rural communities in the United States. [Don't worry, this isn't one long history lecture] It was sparked by the progress in agricultural innovation and the farm shows becoming popular events at the time. For many communities, this is when the concept of school bands, choirs and orchestras seen in larger cities came to smaller towns. An example of this new democratic energy in music can be seen in a quote from composer Arthur Farewell in a 1914 article called "The New Gospel of Music":

"...that the message of music at its greatest and highest is not for the few, but for all; not sometime, but now; that is to be given to all, and can be received by all." — Arthur Farewell (1914)


Farewell wasn't specifically addressing music education, but the idea of music for everyone. This idea has been around for at least 100 years. From 1900-1920, the US experienced an increased attention to "rural uplift" sparked from fears of people migrating from rural communities to cities. Music was included as a means to keep people on the farm using community music making initiatives. By 1919, the first rural school music festival was started in Missouri in order to attract larger numbers of students. By 1929, the festivals included ratings and rankings of musical groups.

 [Hit pause for a second.] Although music was used as a way of creating community, it was also used to keep people from moving

to larger cities. Music was used as a tool to negate the Great Migration of black Americans moving to the north. Competitive festivals grew out of this urge to keep people within their communities. [Play] 

Community Music to School Music Community music utilized a vast array of music teachers including community members and high school students. Emphasis was on the social side of music making, not on the polished musical performance side we see today. One could say it more about the process, not the product.

After World War I, the community music movement lost steam and was replaced with the school music movement. With the exception of segregated black schools which frequently did not have music programs, by the 1930's, white schools adopted the school band, choir and orchestra model of music education that we have today (Groulx, 2017).

[Pause again] Segregated black schools had teachers who would sing  with their students, but the schools were not funded well enough to employ music teachers. This was because of the inequities in funding black schools versus white schools. If black schools had musical instruments or uniforms, they were hand-me-downs from the white schools (Groulx, 2016). It was no coincidence that neighboring black and white schools often had the same school colors. In other words, school bands, choirs and orchestras were one of the primary differences between white and black schools. Re-read that last sentence and sit with it for a second.

In 1900, school orchestras outnumbered school bands in the US. In fact, students didn't have string lessons at school because these were the students already studying privately. This left only the wealthy privileged students participating in instrumental music. Bands developed when the number of students wanting to play in the wind section grew too large. During the jazz era of the 1920's-1930's (i.e., popular music), bands grew in size. Add band festivals to this and now we've merged popular music with competition. What more can you ask for?

Frederick Douglass High School Band, Evansville, Indiana. Early 1920's.



Hello, we have a Problem

A movement 100 years ago to spread music to every student in the US didn't work. Correction: It isn't working. Estimates of current high school music participation are 24% (Elpus & Abril, 2019). While this is an increase from a previous study (Elpus & Abril, 2011), it is still less than a quarter of students. Question: In what situation would we think 24% participation is acceptable? Can you imagine 24% of your class finishing their assignments? Or 24% of the students at your school eating lunch? Or 24% of the choir coming to rehearsal. Or 24% of students taking math

classes. Or 24% of the students attending school? (Okay, with COVID-19, we could imagine that last one)

How did we get to 24% participation? Probably from a slow process of elite music groups and clubs that highlighted superior or musical performance over participatory and creative music making. Practices that valued highly skilled musicians and excluded those with lesser skills. It also lifted up white European classical art music as the model and epitome of great music making. School music programs moved away from community, social and participatory music towards group concert and polished performance music. It also made for better contests.

How do we get out of the 24% rut? Music educators are some of the most hard working people I've known. They also comprise some of the most caring and nicest people I've known. We can't ask music educators to work harder, be more caring and be nicer. We're doing all we can do. Although only 24% of the students are doing music at a high school, I'm 99.99% positive ($p < .001$) that almost all the students in school like music in some way or another. How many people have you met who absolutely hate all forms of music?

I'm a poor advocate for School Music Programs

Many people have heard me say that I'm a poor advocate for music education. I love music education and have dedicated the last 30 years to finding ways for students to engage in music in more effective, enjoyable and expansive ways. But if it's not working for 76% of the students, I would rather renovate than advocate. Positive change in music education needs to start

with positive change in how music is offered in the schools.

For the past couple summers (except 2020. Thanks COVID-19!), I've represented IMEA at the NAFME National Leadership Assembly. Prior to the start of the conference, all the state leadership participate in Hill Day where we visit our state US Senators and Representatives to ask them to vote for bills that support music and the arts. We don't advocate. We ask (i.e., lobby).

Here is what hit me at the end of last summer's Hill Day: Probably 76% of the people I talked to about voting to fund music and support music programs in schools, were never in music in high school. If we couldn't hook them on music when they were in high school, why do we think we can hook them on it now? Back in high school, to support music all they had to do is join a music group. Now they need to vote, raise money, direct funds away from other projects, put their professional job on the line, etc. to support music. That's asking a lot.

It's funny that we work so hard to advocate for an art form that has existed for so long. In 2008, archeologists uncovered a bone flute made 42,000 years ago. 42,000 years later, we still have music. Sure, the flute was made by Neanderthals and not humans, but it still represents music nonetheless. Surgeon, neuroscientist, and musician Charles Limb who became famous after his 2010 TED Talk on improvisation and the brain, will frequently say that music doesn't need our advocacy. It's been around for 1000's of years and it will continue to do so.

We don't realize that maybe the reason

we have to advocate is because the service we're trying to sell (i.e., music education) is not worth buying for 76% of the population. Consider this: If a seller is having a hard time selling their service and only 24% of the population is buying it, the seller should probably change the service. Just trying to sell it better will not be effective. Neither will just working harder, caring more about the customer and being nicer. Those are all good attributes, but it's not going to sell the service. We need a service for the other 76% too.

Oh, and that service? It's not a privilege. It's a right to 100% of the population. [Please re-read that previous sentence]

Where to Look for the Solution?

When we advocate for music in the schools, it assumes the problem with low enrollment and subsequently low funding lies outside the music classroom. It's an assumption that if parents, administrators, legislators and the community were just more aware of the benefits and joys of music, they would support it more. In other words, the problem is not school music (S'all good!). Rather, the problem is everyone else's perception of it.

How is it possible to make positive change in school music if (a) we think our models of music education are good and don't need to be changed and (b) we're relying on the population, 76% of whom didn't enroll in school music in high school, to provide funding and support? I honestly don't think it's possible. Who are we trying to kid? It's not going to work.

Popular Music Education

Across the US, popular music education is a movement that is growing dramatically

and making a significant change in how and how many students are engaging in music. It spans all grades but is most commonly found in elementary schools. The terminology differs depending on where you are, but the concept of modern bands (a term coined by Little Kids Rock's David Wish) is one that is taking hold (Wish, 2020).

Popular music education is the most comprehensive and authentic form of music education I've ever seen. It's creative, exciting, engaging, challenging, rewarding, expressive, social, cultural, therapeutic and most importantly fun (Wright, 2017). We often use these terms to describe music education, but honestly, they don't always apply. In a setting like modern band, they actually do. For example, students in the modern band must exercise social and musical skills in order to practice together.

Teaching modern band takes training, planning and work, but the rewards are so worth it. We see how music speaks to students and students get to see themselves in the music. Students engage in music that is culturally relevant to them. They create music that expresses what they're going through and feeling. As a teacher, you're there to help them realize their musical dreams.

Getting Out of the Rut

Getting stuck in a rut refers to the gouges in the earth formed by repeated travel that catches wagon wheels. It's easier to stay in ruts because the path is worn. If the rut is too deep, getting out of the rut can break your wheels and axel so it's another reason to stay on the same path. Over time, deep ruts can hurt whoever or whatever is pulling the wagon.

Getting out of the rut requires action. It requires pausing to look at what has happened and chart a new path. Here are some action steps you can take to get out of the rut:

- **Promote modern band and popular music pedagogy at the elementary level when all students are involved in music.** Yes, kindergartners can play Low Rider and 1st graders can write songs. 5th graders can rap about recess. I see it happening in Cedar Falls. Bring it up at district music meetings.
- **Replace high school music theory and music history classes with modern band, popular music or music production classes.** Music theory and history classes typically enroll students who are already enrolled in music. By changing the offerings to popular music classes, we can get more students enrolled.
- **Change from individual lessons to group lessons or maybe no lessons at all.** I know, this is an idea that you're thinking is going to destroy school music. In contrast, this could be the movement that saves school music. If grouping or removing lessons can increase the number of students who participate in music at a school, is it worth it? Answer: YES!!!!
- **Attend a popular music or modern band clinic.** There are more and more workshops being offered to music teachers to learn how to teach or coach

modern band. The resources are all online and free. For a listing of these workshops, go to LittleKidsRock.org. Be prepared to have fun!

- **If you have an extra period that needs to be filled, offer a class in popular music.** It could be a modern band class or music production. It could be a songwriting class or a drum set class. It could be a guitar class or a ukulele class. If the title of the class sounds like a course you had to take in college, reconsider. If after writing down the title to the class and you think, “Cool! That would be a fun class to take!”, then you’re on the right track. Sure beats study hall.
- **Find a fellow teacher in your school who is a popular music musician and ask them to collaborate on an after-school popular music club.** Maybe they host a country band, rock/pop band or hip hop club in your music room. Collaborating with another teacher can help if you’re not familiar with these styles. You’ll be surprised at the musicianship you’ll find among teachers.
- **Start a cultural music group.** Cash in on the culture of your community. Invite community members who are musicians in that culture. That’s how mariachi gets started in Denison.

Oh, right. Getting out of the rut and charting a new path will be bumpy, uncomfortable and will require a lot of attention because you want to make sure you’re doing

the right thing. Since it’s no longer smooth, it may even feel like you’re on the wrong path. But this is a path that will get more students involved in music, allowing them to experience the wonderful things music has to offer. As Ed Catmul, co-founder of Pixar and president of Walt Disney Animation Studios would say, “Merely repeating ideas means nothing. You must act—and think—accordingly.”

Now is the Time

The time for change is now. Not after the mass distribution of a vaccine for COVID-19. After the killing of George Floyd, racism in the United States is again brought into the media and social consciousness for all of us to reckon with in every aspect of society. The civil rights movement and protests of the 1960’s also sparked the beginning of equal rights for people with disabilities. One social movement can affect another and we can’t let this opportunity pass without making a change.

There are so many students who are not in music or are pushed out by our models of music education. Unfortunately, just as in the inequities of access to health care, housing, criminal justice, education and income, black and brown students are underrepresented in our secondary music programs (Elpus & Abril, 2011, 2019). They are not equitably represented in the teaching labor force and they hardly exist among music teachers. We can make changes now that can bring music to all students regardless of race, culture, ability, class and income. We can’t make changes if we think things are working just fine. We won’t change the path if the ruts feel smooth and comfortable. But it’s not working. It’s not working for 76% of the US population and that’s wrong. Let’s fix it together.

Please don’t be silent.

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