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MEJ – September 2011
From the Academic Editor
by Patrick K. Freer, Georgia State University, Atlanta

ADVOCACY FOR WHAT? ADVOCACY TO WHOM?

“Matthew is only one of hundreds of music educators across the country facing termination, a move to a different school, or a change in responsibilities because of budget- and tax-cutting movements sweeping through federal, state, and local governments.”

A quote lifted from this morning’s newspaper? It could be, but it appeared exactly thirty years ago in a November 1981 special focus issue of *Music Educators Journal (MEJ)* titled “The Crisis in Music Education.” The recession early in the first presidential term of Ronald Reagan resulted in numerous tax increases and corresponding budget cuts. Reduced federal education funding created budgetary shortfalls at state and local levels, and school officials were faced with difficult decisions about the impact on school programming. Michael P. Prescott (*MEJ*, November 1981, pp. 35-38) noted several factors that contributed to music education’s predicament, including the splintering of the music education field into specialty areas such as band, orchestra, choir, general music, industry, etc. In Prescott’s view, fractionalization resulted in the lack of a coherent vision that could be articulated and convincingly presented to school boards and legislators.

That special focus issue of *MEJ* featured strategy articles from a variety of vantage points, including from parents and supervisors. Notably absent were statements about music’s role in advancing learning in other academic areas – a topic that is ubiquitous among many who advocate for music education today. Those extra-musical arguments are efficiently summarized in David Williams’ “What are Music Educators Doing and How Well are We Doing it?” (*MEJ*, September 2007). In the November 1981 issue, authors instead presented a strong rationale for why music is core to a basic, democratic education for all citizens (Sudano & Sharpham, pp. 48-50). Nonetheless, many music programs were reduced or eliminated over a period of years, and the results foretold in that issue later became the substance of John Kratus’ article, “Music Education at the Tipping Point” (*MEJ*, December 2007). Kratus related the deleterious effects of reduced funding for music education, and his analysis (which provoked a huge number of Letters to the Editor) makes for an interesting comparison with David Williams’ article in our current issue, “The Elephant in the Room.” Both authors see discrepancies between our professional advocacy rhetoric and the reality of the large group performing ensembles that characterize our secondary music programs.

In his article, “A History of Music Education Advocacy” (*MEJ*, September 2002), Michael Mark traced the development of efforts to justify, maintain and enhance music education in the nation’s public schools. Since publication began in 1914, *MEJ* and her predecessors have printed approximately 136 articles and at least as many letters and columns specifically dealing with advocacy. Though

articles in the early years frequently dealt with philosophical issues, the move toward leveraging those ideals for political gain was addressed only rarely. That changed with the economic recession and education reform initiatives of the early 1980s, and shifted dramatically from proactive justifications to defensive responses in the *MEJ* issue of January 1992 with two article sub-titles that included the word “fight:” “Fighting for Every Child’s Right” (Karl Glenn), and “Prepare to Fight for Your Music Program” (Robert A. Harding). Advocacy strategies and related action items coordinated by the MENC staff began appearing with regularity in the 1990s and are now highlighted in nearly every issue of the journal.

The role of *MEJ* in conveying information about advocacy to the MENC membership continues to be substantial. The inherent problems are at least two-fold: 1) *MEJ* readers don’t uniformly agree on what should be advocated, and 2) *MEJ* reaches those who might do the advocating, not necessarily those community members, school boards and legislators who need to hear the message. These two problems comprise the nucleus of our current issue’s lead article, “Apparently, We Disappeared.” Author Lauren Richerme details her analysis of how mainstream media has (often erroneously) portrayed music education since 2005, and she then draws implications for music educators who approach advocacy from any of multiple perspectives.

Perhaps the first *MEJ* article to specifically deal with advocacy issues appeared in February 1933 (then the *Music Supervisors’ Journal*), and it makes for worthwhile reading today. The author, J. Harold Powers, began with this statement:

“In times like the present, when all forms of social movements and institutions become the target for more or less vituperative criticism, insofar as they may affect the economic situation, education could not hope to escape entirely unscathed. We have seen our teaching profession receive more newspaper publicity in the form of editorial comment and criticism during the last two years than in any other ten years . . . Might it not be well to pause here at the low point of the ebb tide, to take account of stock, to give ourselves the same close scrutiny that our critics have been giving us – to consider what we might have done had we been called to the defensive for our very professional life? . . . I submit to you that the stabilizing agencies in this present topsy-turvy world must be the activities and influence of music in the public schools” (p. 10).