

Why Everyone Must Continue to “Defend” Music Education (Using Any Means Necessary)

By Tony Mazzochi - Posted on June 23, 2015 (www.musicparentsguide.com)



I ran across a piece last week on Huffington Post warning people that they should not advocate for music education using the argument that it helps with academic and test performance, etc. The author, Peter Greene, even went so far as to say that it was a “tactical error” to defend music in this manner. He believes that if/when testing doesn’t drive educational policies anymore, music will be left hanging out to dry, having latched on to test improvement as its largest selling point. What was more troublesome than the article itself was the enormous amount of

people who agreed with it, as evidenced by the amount of shares and supportive comments left on the blog.

On the surface, there is a lot to agree with in an “art for art’s sake” argument, but with today’s educational and political landscape, this argument alone will not get us to where we want to be: music as a core part of every child’s school day.

Articles like this are attractive to many. We all love to huddle up in our ideological corners — it’s comfortable, and we love to talk to people who agree with us; in turn we exaggerate and stereotype the “other side”. Ultimately, this was an extreme-viewpoint piece, but because it got so much attention it deserves to be addressed and discussed.

I’ll relate my argument to politics (very quickly, I promise!). I know it is hard to believe, but there are bi-partisan bills that get passed from time to time. When they do, they get passed because one side of the aisle sees something in a bill that’s good for them, but not necessarily the same thing the other side sees, yet both sides win. There’s nothing wrong with this. This is exactly how we need to approach music education advocacy if we are to maintain, grow and create programs. As long as children receive music instruction in the schools as the end result, it does not matter which argument got the programs there — so we can’t marry ourselves to just one.

So let’s start with this: there is Utopia and there is reality. In the case of music in the schools, unfortunately, we live in the latter. The reality is that most people love music — it’s just that many do not believe it needs to be part of our children’s education during the school day. It is also reality that our school system uses quantifiable means of assessment to determine if students are learning and growing, whether we all like it or not. For many administrators, teachers, boards of education and parents, music’s effect on the whole child may need to follow suit with other areas of the curricula as far as assessment is concerned — at least on the surface.

Let's look at some of Mr. Greene's pro-music arguments and how he believes they are better than others:

- **“Music is awesome. It's human. It's universal.”** Well...yes. Yes it is. But I wonder what would happen if — for one whole year — we only used these lines as our advocacy tool. No one would be allowed to publish anything about the benefits music has to our brain; nothing about increased academic performance...nothing else for one year. Think about the town where you live, and the Principals of the schools, and the administration and Board of Ed, and your neighbors. How would those lines work out for you? Not well for me. Unfortunately, some people do not care how awesome and universal music is when it comes to educational policy. So we need to take a different approach.
- **“Music does not need to make excuses for itself, as if it had no intrinsic worth.”** As I have written many times, there is more research of the brain that has been done over the past 25 years than in the past 250 years combined. Talent was once thought to be inherited and innate, not developed, which gave schools even more reasons to decide that it was not for all children. With this research, however, we see that everyone can benefit from learning an instrument, and the benefits cross over to other subjects and other important aspects of being human. Saying “music is freakin' awesome” doesn't quite cut to the core of the issue. Pointing out the benefits of learning an instrument is not “making an excuse” for music — the benefits are real, and we would be crazy not to tout them.
- **“Do not defend a music program because it's good for other things. That's like defending kissing because it gives you stronger lip muscles for eating soup neatly.”** As I mentioned above, science has uncovered that studying music has amazing effects on the brain, and the timing could not be better. Are we supposed to ignore this information? Defending music education because it is good for other things will convince more parents to stay involved, and they will help convince educational leaders to keep the arts in schools. When this happens, all children will pick up an instrument and experience the beauty that arts education provides — exactly what Mr. Greene and others want through an otherwise one-dimensional argument. Everyone wins.

No one would love to live in a world where music education is valued for being the essential human experience that it is as much as I would, and I have dedicated my life energy to exploring ways for us all to get there. But if we are to deftly negotiate the educational/political/social landscape in order to bring music education to the forefront of everyone's minds, we can ill-afford a purist, “art for art's sake” approach as panacea for all that ails our education system.

To all of my professional musician friends who agreed with the Huff Post article: I hear you. I agree with you in principle. But our children are not going to receive music instruction in school if we marry ourselves to one argument — especially Mr. Greene's. When in the trenches at school board meetings, it's not like chatting at a cocktail party with fellow musicians. It's more like when we are at that party where, when we tell people we play an instrument they ask, “So...then you play in a band?” Let's meet these people where they are. It's easy to get bent out of shape when someone else doesn't share our passion and views — but if we want to be effective as music advocates, we have to be flexible in order to be effective.

When great programs are being built and all students are receiving great music instruction in schools on a regular basis, adults will see the benefits of it and our education system will prosper. At the end of the day, we need to use every argument at our disposal to get to that place, especially when the facts are supported by science.