

Music Education for Life

Presidential Theme and Variations

by Scott C. Shuler, MENC President



Photo by Jenna Wedge

“**M**usic Education for Life” is not only the heading for the series of eight *Music Educators Journal* columns that I will write as president but also the theme for my presidency. While these words convey obvious meaning, they are deliberately combined in a sequence that offers multiple interpretations, each of which is important to the future of our profession. With the addition of a strategically placed colon, our theme becomes “Music: Education for Life,” a powerful message for the *public*.

1. An education in music is essential for living well.

Who could imagine a life without music? More important, what student should have to live a life without having experienced the joy of singing, of creating a composition, or of understanding music of aesthetic quality? Clearly, none should ... but too many currently do. This failure is not just a waste of cultural potential, a burden on our citizens' mental and physical health, a squandering of paths that could lead children to happier and more productive lives—it is a civil rights issue! We need to present this fundamental inequity in terms this powerful to decision makers who too often fail to see the dire long-term consequences of narrowing students' opportunities to a nineteenth-century, one-room-schoolhouse, three-Rs curriculum.

2. An education in music makes powerful contributions to making a living.

School music programs provide a powerful and engaging way—arguably *the* most powerful and engaging way—to cultivate important career skills, such as task focus, disciplined contribution to group work, and self-improvement toward high standards of excellence. (You've no doubt heard a 90-percent-correct music performance—you certainly did not award it an A grade!) College admissions and human resource offices understand the “value added” that musicians bring to their organizations. Many of these connections are detailed in the Twenty-First Century Arts Skills Map, available online at www.menc.org. Every child needs and deserves the opportunity to learn these skills through in-school public music education.

The unpunctuated version of the phrase “Music Education for Life” is an equally powerful message for us as *educators*.

The mission of our work, stated in simplest terms, is to help students find musical paths they are willing to walk into their adult lives. We must therefore offer children paths to lifelong musical involvement that include but extend well beyond the traditional band-choir-and-possibly-orchestra model that continues to attract less than 15 percent of high school students in the United States. We need to offer the other 85 percent of the student body—our future school board members, legislators, administrators, and voters—opportunities to engage actively in music making through attractive alternative vehicles, such as guitar and keyboard, steel pan and mariachi, and music composition and digital recording/technology. We must

help members of this generation attached to iPods translate that relatively passive musical addiction into direct, hands-on involvement. Modern technologies and traditional forms offer many engaging ways to enter the amazing, creative, and limitless world that is music. Regardless of the paths our students choose, we must help them approach music as an exciting lifelong adventure—an absolute necessity and enduring source of joy, to which our classes only open the door.

I plan to address these and other issues and opportunities in more detail in my seven future *MEJ* columns. No word better fits my purpose than *column*. Architecturally, the term *column* is often used interchangeably with *pillar*. Both are designed to provide sturdy support for larger structures. This column and the seven to follow will present pillars of a vision of music education that will, in my opinion, provide powerful support to the important work our profession needs to accomplish over the coming years, to wit:

1. Improving our own effectiveness as professionals;
2. Increasing our effectiveness as advocates for music education;
3. Building a future of universal public school music, taught by expert, certified teachers; and, most important,
4. Assuring every child in America a high-quality music education.

Looking ahead: To accomplish these four goals, we must organize ourselves to work closely and efficiently together as advocates for music education, particularly in the current economy. My next column will be titled “Banding Together to Weather Tough Times.”

21st Cent. Music Program

© Scott C. Shuler

K 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12

GENERAL MUSIC

(Required for all students K - 8)

Middle School

Strands in:

Composition,

Analytical

Listening,

Music History,

Guitar, Keyboard

MUSIC COMPOSITION

(Applied Music Theory)

AP THEORY

HISTORY/HUMANITIES

GUITAR, KEYBOARD

ELECTIVES:

(In addition to
General Music)

NON-TRADITIONAL ENSEMBLES*

Mariachi, Rock/Fusion, Steel Pan, Gospel,
World Drumming, Gamelan, Recorder, etc.

CHORAL ENSEMBLES

also: chamber, jazz/gospel, select groups*

BAND

also: chamber, jazz, select groups*

Recorders

ORCHESTRA

also: chamber, jazz/fiddle, select groups*

Suzuki Strings

5 Guiding Principles for Arts Education

1. An education in ***all of the arts*** is important for ***all students***.
2. ***Independence*** (artistic literacy) is necessary for a life enriched by the arts.
(i.e., students must be able to continue doing what they do while they are *in* the arts classroom, after they *leave* the arts classroom)
3. Independent arts literacy can be described as the ability to carry out the ***three artistic processes***: creating, performing, and responding to the arts.
4. To achieve independence and transition to adult involvement in the arts, students must ***begin arts study early*** and ***continue in high school***.
5. High school arts ***electives must address a variety of interests*** to attract a variety of students.
(i.e., schools must offer a variety of art forms and variety of paths within each art form)