



Is Anybody Listening?

As your program's best advocate, you need to be prepared to deliver a positive and clear message about fine arts education.

by Peter Warshaw

Advocating for fine arts programs continues to become more critical to the existence and success of our programs, and with that it has likely become a more frequent requirement of your job. At one time, advocacy was limited to causes such as promoting the use of a particular concept to teach our students or explaining to parents and administrators the need for taking students on a trip. However, many of us now find ourselves having to advocate for the actual existence of our programs, or key components without which students would not succeed.

The program director is in the best position to accomplish this advocacy, through their interaction with students, parents, and administrators. The director can call attention to the hard work of their students and the positive results of those efforts; speak to justify the financial, social, and time commitment of participation in the program; point out the long-term benefits of participation in the organization; and highlight the potential career opportunities for their graduates.

Most experienced directors are highly aware of these and other benefits, but our belief that the arts reaches students like nothing else can and our dedication to the craft and artistry of teaching are not enough. Each of us who is pressed to advocate the importance of an excellent fine arts education must be able to communicate effectively and successfully. Preparation and a thorough knowledge of the subject matter are paramount.

Maintaining Audience Attention

The most successful speakers are those who can quickly get the attention of their audience and then present their message

as clearly and succinctly as possible. An excellent example of this is Daniel Pink's keynote address at the First General Session at the most recent TMEA convention. Within a very brief time, he gained the attention of his audience and then maintained that hold throughout his

entire presentation. If you weren't able to attend that session, be sure to watch Pink's keynote speech available from the TMEA homepage, www.tmea.org.

Building Relationships

Establishing a connection with your audience will allow you to communicate quickly and successfully with them. By focusing on similarities and mutual goals, you can help foster a beneficial relationship with them and this relationship will be key to your advocacy success.

There are many connections between the artistic vocabulary and the literary, scientific, and mathematical vocabularies. These connections are an excellent place to start. Anything that provides a connection between the arts and the other academic areas will help solidify your position as being one who wants to advocate *for* the arts rather than *against* something else.

Another significant connection between the arts and other academic curricula are the many instructional techniques that fine arts educators have used for many years that are now becoming standard pedagogy in the foundation curriculum. I vividly remember a presentation I attended that included discussion of a "new" educational technique called "backward design" in which you determine the desired result and then work backward to create a pathway to achieve that goal. You have likely already

been employing this and other techniques listed below that are becoming pedagogical standards in other academic areas:

- Assessment for Learning
- Backward Design
- Cross-curricular Instruction
- Checking for Understanding
- Differentiated Instruction
- Guided Practice
- Inductive Reasoning
- Peer Modeling
- Rubrics
- Self-Assessment
- Small Group Instruction
- Student-Driven Learning
- Teaming
- Vertical Alignment

When advocating, make use of everything you can find to create and solidify these types of connections and establish solid relationships between your audience and you.

Advocating for the Value of the Arts

One clear advantage fine arts advocates have is the inherent value of art. Yet it can be simple and sometimes seductive to base an argument for student participation in a fine arts organization on its “side effects” (a term I first read in a book by Bruce Adolphe, a musician and composer).

While goals such as citizenship, cultural awareness, enhanced brain activity, and heightened self-esteem are indeed valuable, there are other activities through which our students can build them. Additionally, if further research were to prove that participation in a fine arts organization did not actually address student needs in one or more of these areas, it could ultimately weaken the overall message of the value of a fine arts education.

Knowing Your Audience

Part of your preparation should be to seek to understand your audience’s point of view as it could differ from your own. While a director’s most pressing concern may be the number of students in the organization and the quality of education students receive, principals and upper-level administrators must care about TAKS scores and school ranking. And while students want to be good at what they do and have fun doing it, their parents want their children to be happy and have a positive learning experience.

Do your best to determine what is most important to those in attendance. In this way, you will have the greatest chance at successfully delivering your message.

The attention span of your audience may be short. In this situation, providing too much information could prove detrimental to your overall goal and obscure the most important points. Most people prefer presentations to be as succinct as possible. And while it is critical to repeat your core message, listeners shouldn’t feel berated in the process. This simply challenges you to find multiple ways to convey your message to ensure it resonates with each listener in a way that they remember after they leave your presentation.

Using Presentation Materials Effectively

Another important consideration in your advocacy efforts is determining how to present the material. While it’s certainly acceptable to use a visual aid such as a PowerPoint slide show, ensure that the aids you use supplement the message you present rather than duplicate it. If you distribute a handout, be certain the printed material complements what you say and show.

Revise and edit the presentation to increase its effectiveness and efficiency. Check for a natural flow of the information by outlining what you will cover, and eliminate redundancy.

If you recycle a presentation, be sure to tailor it in a way that will reach the next audience. It would be embarrassing to present a slide show to your administrators or school board members that includes a slide encouraging parents to become more politically active, especially if that meant taking a stance against a stated board policy.

The best news is that as an advocate for fine arts, you have many resources at your fingertips. Many professional organizations specialize in providing advocacy materials to directors seeking information to support student participation in the arts. While you may be familiar with materials provided by TMEA, Conn-Selmer, CEDFA, and Music For All, there are other excellent sources available to you. In addition to professional organizations, you likely have resources in your own backyard: business, community, and/or political leaders who are former participants in a fine arts organization; profes-

sional artists and musicians; university faculty; school or public librarians; school alumni; and satisfied parents.

Having a former student who has become successful in their chosen career speak to current students and parents about the value and application of their fine arts education can be one of the most meaningful things you do.

Expecting the Best

Most importantly, we should always advocate for the highest possible artistic standards, and never settle for mediocrity. To be the most effective advocates, we must always work from a platform of a high standard of excellence.

Remember that your potential sphere of influence is increased each time you speak on behalf of your organization and your students. An audience member you convinced to support your cause one day could become someone with great power and influence the next day. When they have that influence, they may choose to repay what they learned, possibly through a donation that helps keep a symphony orchestra alive, a commission for a work of art, or help building a performing arts facility. It could even turn out to be one of your former students who chooses to give back in this manner.

Consider this the next time you think about giving up on that student who doesn’t ever seem to get their part learned, or the time next time you’re invited to speak to a group of parents. While the importance of shaping our students for a successful future is obvious, that brief presentation on the value of an excellent fine arts education could become equally critical to their future and to ours.

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Know Your Audience's Interests

When you communicate with any group, you should assess their interests to determine the most effective means for delivering your message. Before you create your next presentation or plan what to say in your next meeting, consider the interests of the following groups and think about how to frame your message in a way that speaks to those interests.

Administrators

- AEIS Indicators
- Budget
- Dropout rates
- Master schedules
- Mentoring
- Promotion of the school and district
- Scholarships
- Successful and well-rounded alumni
- Test scores (TAKS, SAT, ACT)
- AP course enrollment
- Community involvement
- Interscholastic competition
- Math/science instruction
- Personnel Units (FTEs)
- Recognition
- Student involvement in activities to promote school loyalty

Parents

- Safe environment
- Child's happiness
- Child's educational progress
- Child's discipline
- Child's success with schoolwork
- Preparation for life following graduation
- Clear information from music director on time commitment
- Frequent communication from music director
- Philosophical components of the program
- Positive peer relationships
- Scholarship opportunities
- School awareness of child's needs
- Fair treatment of child
- Child involved in positive groups

Students

- Having fun
- Being good at what they do
- Sense of belonging
- Developing peer relationships
- Developing adult relationships
- Opportunities to lead
- Being part of something successful
- Feeling significant
- Being part of the decision-making process
- Influencing the future
- Having clear communication and having trustworthy teachers
- Understanding why they are being asked to do something