

Turning the Tide for Music Education in America

By
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Not long ago, music teachers at a District-wide event were asked what they believed to be the toughest obstacle currently challenging music education programs in American schools, followed by their solution to overcome that obstacle. Teachers named budget cuts, student behavioral issues, unreasonable testing policies, student truancy, interrupted class bells, students being pulled from their classes, absent or manipulative parents, and student apathy. The best overall solution rose to the top: require a music education through middle school for every child, with no students being pulled out of the class for test preparations. Students with a good, uninterrupted music education through 8th grade would be more likely to choose high school music classes and would be more musically adept as adults. This solution, however, generates a new problem: where would we get the additional class time and money to provide music classes for every student in our middle schools? A look at our world competitors in education points us to a single directive for this answer: eliminate standardized testing and grading in the younger grades. If standardized testing and grading were eliminated from all elementary classes, time and money could be freed up and funneled into the arts so that all of our students could benefit from music's positive effects during their formative K-8 schooling. This would create an excellent foundation for either their high school music experience or at most for a lifelong appreciation of music.

The mere mention of dropping standardized testing and the current grading system from the elementary schools ignites debate among parents. Some parents believe that testing and grading are a necessary component to measure their child's success, and

hold fast to the idea that these tools are their best mechanism for tracking their children's progress. Others believe that the time used for standardized testing, along with the undue stress that many children experience while taking tests and being graded for everything they do in school, interferes with the child's natural curiosity and exploration. This impedes student growth and often destroys the child's love for learning. Research groups keep everyone confused, providing supporting data for both theories. Since the theory at hand includes removing mandated testing and grading, while providing music education to all students through the 8th grade, taking a look at the practices of other countries that are ranked high in both overall education and music education could help reveal the best solution for America.

Public Education in Finland

Finland has been recognized by a number of organizations to be the highest-ranking country in the world for its public education system. Finnish students do not begin school until age 7. They are not given homework or tested until their teens and are given only one mandatory standardized test at age 16. Finnish students are not graded for the first 6 years of their education and elementary students get 75 minutes of recess per day. The difference between the strongest and weakest students in Finland is the smallest in the world, and 66% of the students go on to college.¹

Where does music education rank in Finnish schools? According to Klemmetin, "Finland's acclaimed music education has succeeded in combining the best features of the old Russian and Hungarian schools with the principles of the Nordic welfare state and

¹ Taylor, Adam. "26 Amazing Facts about Finland's Educational System." *Business Insider International*. 11 December 2011. [journal online]; <http://www.businessinsider.com/finland-education-school-2011-12>; accessed 23 April 2016.

democracy. Establishing a good relationship between music and all other academic disciplines has become the basis of the new teaching methods. The audible result—quality—nevertheless continues to occupy a significant role. The pillars supporting the Finnish music school system have been—and still are—the state and municipal funding, the high standard of teacher training, institutional networking, the nationwide spread of good practices, and the Finns’ high respect for music and the arts in general.”²

Education in Norway

For another comparison, consider Norway’s educational system. According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) poll,³ Norway ranks #3 in world education. Norway also does not give students grades until they are 12 or 13 years old. Then, students are evaluated on a 1-6 rank, rather than our 5-letter scale.

Norway describes its music education offerings as follows:

“All learners have music as a subject in the compulsory school system every school year from 6 until 16. Kindergarten is not compulsory but it does provide music training. In primary school (years 1-7) at least 285 hours (60 minutes units) should be taught and for lower secondary school (years 8-10) 85 hours. The municipalities fund primary and lower secondary education and have a great deal of freedom when it comes to organising the

² Klemettinen, Timo. “Music Education in Finland.” *Finlandia Foundation National*. [website online]; <http://finlandiafoundation.org/soiva-music-camp/music-education-in-finland/>; accessed 23 April 2016.

³ Ryo. “The Ten Most Educated and Smartest Countries in 2012.” *Skeptikai*. 16 April 2012. [journal online]; <http://skeptikai.com/2012/04/16/the-ten-most-educated-and-smartest-countries-in-2012/>; accessed 23 April 2016.

education. For example they are allowed to decide not to have music all of the years but to make a free distribution of hours between the years.”⁴

A Look at Japan and Australia

Australia and Japan are two other high-ranking countries in education, both of which focus on student development without giving grades or tests during the younger years of their students, and who each also offer music education for all students through middle school. Clearly, these countries are also succeeding and thriving without using a grading system or testing in elementary school, and while requiring music through middle school. Although the United States has a different student demographic population than these countries, there is no reason to assume that every child here could not also benefit from learning in an environment that promotes development along his or her specific growth continuum without the judgment of testing and grades, while enjoying music education.

This is not to suggest that teachers should stop teaching specific facts and skills on a well-planned continuum in the regular classroom; however, teachers would seek a different way to track success in each student. As teachers present material, students would be allowed to learn according to their own developmental timelines, demonstrating their achievements in specific skill areas measured through games and activities. This would eliminate the time and money we now spend for I.E.P.’s (individual education plans), because every student would be following his or her own learning track, completing and passing modules when ready. Such measurements would be non-

⁴ Niermann, Franz and Malmberg, Isolde, project coordinators. “Music Education in Norway.” *MeNet (Music Education Network)*. [website online]; http://menet.mdw.ac.at/menetsite/english/t_content3_1_1_no.html; accessed 23 April 2016.

judgmental, fun, and motivating for our students. Music would be presented in the same way. Each class offering would encourage student engagement, discovery, and mastery with curiosity as its ignition. Elementary schools would resemble Montessori schools, with a little more structure.

Challenging standardized testing is a huge undertaking. Standardized testing proponents juggle the figures to make their financial data look good: the approximate 1.7 billion spent per state on testing only accounts for a quarter of 1% of total K-12 spending in our country.⁵ But the larger question is, could that money be better spent for our children? Why spend any money at all on a practice that is not clearly beneficial for the child and does not have a proven positive effect on every child's overall education? According to the Council of the Great City Schools, American students spend approximately 101.5 hours taking over 48 mandated tests during grades K-5, and students in middle school take another 27 mandated tests for an additional 70.9 hours of their time, not including the practice tests and other preparation time spent prior to the mandated tests.⁶

Rethinking Assessment

Some administrators are finally asking the same questions. Miami-Dade's County Public Schools Superintendent Alberto Carvalho recently cut the end-of-course exams in his district from 300 to 10, and eliminated them entirely for the elementary

⁵ Ujifusa, Andrew. "Standardized Testing Costs States 1.7 Billion a Year, Study Says." 29 November 2012. *Education Week*. 23 April 2016. [journal online]; <http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2012/11/29/13testcosts.h32.html>; accessed 23 April 2016.

⁶ Layton, Lindsey. "Study says standardized testing is overwhelming nation's public schools." *The Washington Post*. 24 October 2015. [journal online]; https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/study-says-standardized-testing-is-overwhelming-nations-public-schools/2015/10/24/8a22092c-79ae-11e5-a958-d889faf561dc_story.html; accessed 23 April 2016.

schools. He believes in accountability, but also maintains that “fewer assessments of higher quality are better. . . . What we have now across the country is confusing, hard to navigate, and I believe, abusive of both teacher and student time.”⁷

While eliminating testing would greatly relieve the stress level in our elementary students and teachers, the effects of music education for all children through grade 8 would conversely create many benefits for our children. Music therapists have successfully addressed ADD, ADHD, autism, and health issues with specific pieces of music for a specific amount of time. In parallel, music educators witness students finding a similar calming joy from moving to music, singing, playing music in their classes. Children can build confidence, use problem-solving skills, learn to follow sequences, project if-then conclusions, build motor skills, expand reading, listening, and comprehension skills, overcome their fear of the unknown, explore creativity, experience positive outlets for passion, and build community during each well-prepared music lesson.

The positive effects music has on the child’s spirit cannot be quantified, but it may well be the energy that the student needs for confidence and success in his or her other learning and life experience scenarios. These benefits should continue to be available for every child through the middle school years. Consider a recent All-City Chorus event in one city, where 120 6th graders gathered to sing Jim Papoulis’ song, *I Ask for One Day*, with lyrics written by 7th-grader, Claire Latimer. Passion filled the air, power swept the room, and parents wiped a few tears as the students’ voices rang out through the auditorium, “*I ask for one day where I don’t have to hear about pain or life that’s lost.*” Unfortunately, this beautiful chorus of children represented only 30% of the

⁷ Ibid.

children enrolled in the city's school Chorus programs, and the city's school Chorus, Band, and Strings programs combined often represent only 25% of each school's student population who are currently enjoying music in middle school.

Heads Up, America!

Our tax dollars could be better spent for music classes than for mandated grading and testing, and our children and teachers should be able to work together successfully with less stress. We may never turn the tide toward music education in America or win the music advocacy debate by trying to prove that music makes the brain smarter, although numerous studies indicate that it does. School administrators continue to raise the questions "How? What? When? Where? and Why", and seem to seek answers only through the eyes of test data statistics. Music educators don't have the time or money to produce continued statistical studies proving their program's relevance. Perhaps the best stance for music educators is to point politicians and administrators toward the successful policies of the countries rated the highest in education worldwide. These same countries succeed by avoiding grading and giving mandated tests to their students until high school, and investing money in music education and the arts for all children through grade 8.

If America would take her cues for educational policies from the successful practices of Finland, Norway, Japan, and Australia, our students could benefit from an improved overall educational system. This system would be free from testing and grading, and be filled with music education for every child through 8th grade in a well rounded, less stressful educational experience that student and teacher deserve.