**Manitoba Music Educators Conference Keynote Address**

**The Power and Promise of Music Education in the Reform Era**

My job allows me to travel quite a bit, so I’ve had the opportunity to see a wide diversity of music programs in schools and colleges in many different settings, from small rural schools and state universities, to large urban schools and conservatories of music, in the US, Canada and China...and I believe that we have never had better music teachers in our schools than we have right now. I see great talent, passion, and creativity everywhere I go, and hear from these teachers that they are deeply committed to providing rich, meaningful opportunities for their students. The number and quality of offerings is growing, and we are witnessing a re-conceptualization of what "school music" means--this new model is inclusive while retaining the best of our musical and cultural traditions, and is welcoming new populations into music classrooms by emphasizing expanded avenues of music making, such as ukuleles, drumming circles and songwriting classes.

What has made these programs possible?

• The quality of today's music teachers is outstanding. They are talented, smart and well informed. They also have diverse musical skills, and an awareness of how music "fits in" to the big picture of schooling and education. When I graduated in 1980 I could play the trumpet, and conduct...the flute part of a grade 2 band piece. When my nephew graduated from Michigan State in 2014, he could play the trumpet--better than I ever could--improvise beautifully in a variety of styles, write his own songs, sing, and play the piano, guitar and ukulele. Some of these things he learned in school, many he learned on his own. He's currently teaching elementary and middle school music in Los Angeles, and playing in a band. His skill set is much richer and more multi-dimensional than mine, and I don't think he's so different than many of today's music educators. As my former student and colleague Janice Waldron from the University of Windsor might say, these new teachers are "bi-musical", and fluent in multiple musical styles and genres. They represent the future of music education, a future that will require both depth and breadth of skills in order to be effective.

• Our best teachers also tend to be well-connected to their professional organizations, and seek out high quality professional development. One of the things we know through research is that teachers who attend professional development events tend to remain active members of the profession, while those who don’t often wind up leaving the classroom. Events like the Manitoba Music Conference, which brings together elementary, string, band and chorus teachers, as well as your colleagues from higher education, to share and learn from one another, help to create a broad and diverse community of music educators who respect what each other have to offer our profession. We are stronger when we are all together, and speaking with one voice as a profession.

• Music programs today are grounded in solid philosophical and theoretical foundations—they are based on comprehensive, sequential general music programs in the elementary schools, and the band, orchestra and chorus programs at the secondary level expand on those foundations. When I was entering the profession, music teachers were lucky if they had any training in a single methodological system, and it was more likely that their preparation followed what was known as the "eclectic" approach--a hodgepodge of nonsense syllables, mnemonic devices, and holiday-themed activities. The most popular rhythm syllable system was "nothing," and virtually no one in band or orchestra ever sang during rehearsal. Our students now leave college with a solid grounding in at least one of the major methods, bring those pedagogical strategies into their teaching in multiple settings, and are encouraged to seek certification and training in other approaches as well.

Children coming out of these teachers' programs arrive at college well-prepared for the rigors of further music study, or ready to continue their avocational musical careers in community bands and orchestras, church choirs, and a variety of informal and recreational musical activities.

So, we are fortunate to be teaching in a time with excellent music and arts programs—but sadly this is not the case everywhere. You may have heard about the decision in Lansing, MI, where I live, to eliminate all elementary music, art and PE. This has created an enormous equity issue for children and families in our region—while those who live in more affluent, suburban settings enjoy rich, meaningful experiences in the arts, their peers in Lansing or Flint or Detroit have little to no access to these opportunities.

We are also seeing the impact of corporate reform agendas in school systems in Sweden and England, where, according to Andy Hargreaves from Boston College, "England no longer values these things. About half of its schools are now outside local authority control. England offers a business capital model that invests in education to yield short-term profits and keep down costs through shorter training, weakened security and tenure, and keeping salaries low by letting people go before they cost too much."

A similar situation exists across North America, as we hear a narrative that describes teachers as "lazy" or "bad," our schools as “failing”, and our children as "falling behind" when compared to their peers in places like Finland or Taiwan. I’m here to tell you that in my travels I don’t see any lazy teachers, failing schools or children that are falling behind. What I see are state and federal governments that have stopped adequately funding our public schools, and political leaders who are trying to privatize and profit from a public “good.” Considering the conditions in which they are currently working, I believe that our teachers are doing nothing less than heroic work with our children. Our schools, teachers and children aren’t failing—our society is failing them.

Now, a caveat: I'm not a big believer that standardized test scores tell us very much worth knowing about what children know and can do, and I’m distrustful of the obsession with "Big Data" that seems to control so much of our work nowadays as teachers. In fact, I’m a fan of what’s now being referred to as “Small Data”. Huge companies like Walmart, that have relied on Big Data—data sets that are so large that traditional data processing applications are inadequate—are now having problems. Here’s a quick story—in 2002, Lego relied on Big Data analysis that suggested the “instant gratification” generation didn’t have the attention span to handle the small size of Lego’s blocks, and made the decision to change to much larger, and easier to put together parts in their products. Nearing bankruptcy, Lego decided to try a Small Data approach, and began going into the homes of consumers all over Europe. They talked with the children using their products, watched how they played…and then did two things: changed back to the smaller blocks, and made the Lego movie, to show the connections between their products and the lives of their consumers. The rest is history, and Lego is again #1.

In short, Big Data is about finding correlations, and Small Data is about finding the causation, the reasons why. Policy scholars know that all good policy work is about using compelling data and compelling stories to make the case for their policy recommendations—the persons advocating for more standardized testing have focused exclusively on Big Data correlations, like Value Added Measures, or VAM, ignoring the “user experience” that forms the core of Small Data. The result has been a system that most teachers, who are “on the ground” in classrooms, and experts in how children learn, know is deeply flawed and not meaningful for them, or their students.

Now, this is what we don’t hear very often—when those same test scores are controlled for SES (socio-economic status), our students in schools from places with comparable poverty levels score at the very top of the ratings, just as good or better than any schools in the world. So, the "issue" here isn't with our students, teachers or schools--it's with the systemic, enduring and devastating effects of poverty on our communities.

The truth is that much of the “doom & gloom” we read in the news about education today is a manufactured crisis. It's important to make sure that we all keep in mind how fortunate we are if we have fine schools and music programs, and to advocate tirelessly for those programs for all children, and in all communities--because I believe that given the current education reform climate, what we have to offer as music teachers may be more valuable and needed than ever before.

The Pitfalls and Promises of Education Policy and Practice

Recently, I was at a conference in North Carolina where the guest speaker identified 4 possible pitfalls in today’s educational scene. I want to invite you to think with me about these ideas for a few minutes, especially as they relate to today's educational climate:

1. The 1st point centered on the notion that teacher quality is best measured by improvements in student test scores.

2. The 2nd point was the notion that “pedagogical development knowledge”, or PDK, is the same as “subject matter knowledge,” or SMK--or, that all it takes to teach math, is knowing some math.

3. The 3rd point focused on the notion of “teachers as saviors,” and that the schools can solve the nation’s problems, and even those of the world. Implicit in this assumption is that other factors, such as adequate resources for the schools, money for facilities, equipment and teacher salaries, etc., are somehow less important.

4. Finally, the speaker challenged the notion that the purpose of the schools is to produce the nation’s workforce, and that the nation’s economy depends on the educational system—and that other purposes of education are less important.

How do these issues impact our lives as teachers, parents and community members?

Related to the first two points, on teacher quality and what it takes to be a teacher—I have been working since the mid-1990s in the preparation of new teachers and teacher educators. In the last couple of years, many of the changes we have seen in education policy have made these tasks much more difficult than ever before.

While there is no doubt that a good teacher in the classroom or on the podium is the single most important in-school element in the “educational equation”, the idea that teacher quality has a causal relationship to students’ test scores is simplistic and naïve. The fact is that less than 10% of the differences in student achievement are attributable to in-school factors—and the rest is due to things like parental support, socio-economic status and other out-of-school factors--which account for more than 70% of the differences in student achievement. We need to remember that schools should be about much more than just academic achievement—as measured solely by tests—and that social, physical, artistic, emotional and aesthetic development are equally important outcomes to a sound educational program.

We are seeing similar problems with teacher evaluation in many places. Teachers are now being evaluated simplistically, on a 4-point scale, with nearly half of that rating being based on student scores on standardized tests. Especially troubling for music teachers is that part of their rating is based on test scores in subjects that they don’t teach, like math or reading, and on test scores for children that are not even in their classes. That doesn’t seem right, or fair. However, in a potentially groundbreaking ruling, a judge in New York State recently found that VAM, the complex statistical formula used to compute the value of these test scores, represents a "capricious and arbitrary" means of evaluating a teacher's effectiveness, and should not be used to evaluate teachers' performance.

We often hear the saying, “We measure what we treasure." Well, I would respectfully suggest that exactly the opposite is true. In fact, the things that we value and care about the most are those things that are precisely the most resistant to being measured. If you'd like to test this out for yourselves, here's a little experiment to try on your own: go home tonight and assign your wife, husband, spouse or partner a numeric grade based on their performance at home this week; or give each of your children ratings that compare one against the other. And then please let me know how that works out for you...

Regarding “teachers as saviors”…I believe that sometimes we are our own worst enemies as music teachers. When teachers of other subjects are faced with cuts to their programs they respond by scaling back their course offerings and using those depleted resources in the places that best influence student learning in their discipline. But when music programs are cut, how do we respond?

We schedule extra or longer rehearsals, we have extra lessons and coaching sessions, and we spend more of our own time and money making up the differences. The result is often that our principals and students' parents don't notice any difference in the quality of our programs or performances, and we continue to be expected to “do more with less.” It's a particular phenomenon that seems to effect music educators disproportionately more than teachers of other subject areas—to be clear, I’m not suggesting that we consciously “do less,” or “teach worse.” But I would suggest that we think hard about the messages we send to our administrators and the parents of our students when our programs are targeted for reductions in staff or resources. We need to be realistic and honest about the impacts of these cuts on our students’ learning—and on our lives as teachers, parents and human beings.

The final issue, about the purpose of education being to produce students who are “career and college ready,” is another "talking point" that I believe we need to push back against. This stance represents a subtle transformation of the true purpose of education, from one that is about the development of meaningful relationships between teachers and learners—and among learners—to one that is simply a transfer of information from teacher to learner; a sort of educational “banking transaction” if you will.

Since no one who advocates that schools are about producing children that are “college and career ready” ever seems to talk to actual parents, or students, as the father of 2 school age boys I'm taking the liberty to share my thoughts on the subject.

Here is what I don't want with respect to my kids' education:

I'm not interested in an educational approach that is targeted on producing "college and career ready" graduates. My boys are 13 and 15. We hope they attend college, choose a major they are passionate about, and find a way to apply their talents and abilities in jobs that they enjoy and that make a strong contribution to their community and society in general. But that's not the purpose of education. Education is not "job training". It’s so much more, and limiting the creativity and wonder of learning to “college and career readiness” is a perversion of the true purpose and value of education. The reformers have a very narrow, impoverished notion of education as nothing more than a banking transaction, in which teachers make deposits and students make withdrawals. It’s little wonder that their approach to schooling is erasing the joy of learning for students and teachers in far too many of our schools today.

I don't care if my children are "globally competitive"--that's nothing more than Cold War-style fear mongering. Having recently returned from Shanghai, I can report that the Chinese educators I had the pleasure of working with were very interested in American educational strategies and ideas, and not for reasons of "global competitiveness." They seemed honestly interested in how what we do as teachers was the same or different from their approaches to teaching and learning, wanted to know how US teachers were prepared in colleges and universities, and were eager to share their traditions and ideas with us.

And, I don't want an increasing bevy of tests consuming ever larger swaths of time and energy in my children's education. As Arthur Costa so famously said: “What was educationally significant and hard to measure has been replaced by what is educationally insignificant and easy to measure. So now we measure how well we taught what isn’t worth learning.”

The truth is that these tests are measuring the things that are easy to measure, and ignoring the things that really matter--relationships between teachers and students, and among students themselves.

Here's what I do want for my children's education, and for education in general:

\* I want my children to read for enjoyment, play an instrument and sing, draw, dance, play, think, feel and be kind.

\* I want schools to be richly diverse, noisy, messy places full of discovery, where instead of worrying about a stifling regimen of tests, children are encouraged to explore, ponder, experiment and create.

\* I want rich arts programs, nurses, psychologists, counselors and librarians in every school, to make sure that no child comes to or leaves school hungry, and for schools to be places where every child and adult is treated with dignity and respect.

\* I want my children's teachers to be free to create their own lessons, and work collaboratively with their colleagues in a climate of trust and mutual respect with their administrators, school board members and parents.

\* I want those teachers to be evaluated based on the work they do in the classroom with their students, not on standardized test scores in subjects they don't teach, from students they've never met.

\* I want those teachers to be well prepared, and fully certified in their subject area with a semester or more of internship experience before being entrusted with their own classrooms.

\* I want all children to be taught by persons who care about their students’ growth and development as full human beings, not about their test scores.

Again, to be clear, I am not against the development of students who are capable of moving on to college or the workforce—but that is not the purpose of education, and never has been. That’s a by-product of schooling, not a purpose. Just as the purpose of teaching music is not to get a good rating at festival, or to win a blue ribbon at solo and ensemble contest, but rather to help our students learn the musical skills and knowledge that will help them to become lifelong music makers and supporters of the arts.

The Promise of Music Education for the “Accountability Era”

So why, after all of this gloomy discussion, am I optimistic, and why do I think that music in schools is more important now than its ever been? Because never before in my teaching career can I think of a time when what we had to offer as music teachers was more desperately needed, by our students, our schools and our society.

Every Fall we have a wonderful event at MSU—the Music Ed Rally. It’s a gathering of all of our music education students, from incoming freshmen to 3rd year PhD candidates, faculty, local music teachers, alumni, and invited guests. As I welcome this group to celebrate the opening of another school year, I always find myself feeling just a touch jealous of our students—because as I approach the end of my career, they are just beginning theirs—and they have so much to look forward to.

I’m also optimistic because I believe that music and the arts may be a possible solution to many of the dilemmas we face in education. As one of my education heroes, the late Elliott Eisner, said:

“In spelling and in arithmetic there are correct answers, answers whose correctness can be proven. In the arts judgments are made in the absence of rule. The temperature of a color might be a tad too warm, the edge of a shape might be a bit too sharp, the percussion might need to be a little more dynamic. What the arts teach is that attention to such matters matter. The arts teach students to act and to judge in the absence of rule, to rely on feel, to pay attention to nuance, to act and appraise the consequences of one’s choices and to revise and then to make other choices.”

Music and the other arts show students how to appreciate beauty; to make critical judgments that require deep and thoughtful listening and consideration; to be aware of their feelings and emotions in ways that no other subject demands; to understand that vulnerability is not a weakness; and that improvement is more important than perfection.

As the father of two school age boys, I see first hand the impact of a fine school music program on my kids. Music has helped them to think of problems in more creative, open-ended ways. They understand that there is often more than one “right” way to answer a question—especially when the question is a difficult one. They are comfortable with what psychologists call “divergent” thinking—the ability to see multiple solutions to a problem. Kids who study music know how to work together collaboratively in groups, to value the efforts of all team members, and that every person has the ability to make a worthwhile contribution to the group’s work. And, most importantly, they have the opportunity to experience music making in school in a variety of ways, with expert guidance and support. Their musical “itches” are being “scratched,” and their teachers are helping them identify interests they didn’t even know they had. My older son has become a devotee of Duke Ellington, and both boys joined my wife and I at a concert recently by their favorite music groups: Chicago, and Earth, Wind & Fire. They also listen to plenty of hip hop and Japanese electronic and anime music—musical tastes that I am unequipped to help them with…

So, I am optimistic because I know that music, when taught well, provides the “antidote” to today’s “teach to the test”, assessment-driven culture. Because, when taught well, music helps persons to find their voices, to express their feelings, and to become more fully human.

The Right Questions

I recently wrote an article for an education blog that received a surprising, yet encouraging, amount of attention. The article was about knowing the right questions to ask when considering the issues facing our schools. Here are a few of these questions. . .

• What can we do to reduce the staggering levels of child poverty, not just in our cities but across demographics? Nearly a third of American children are now living in poverty, and this has a devastating impact on the ability of these children to come to school ready to learn.

• Why have we become obsessed with measuring things that don't mean what we think they mean, and using those measurements to punish children, teachers, schools and communities? There is nothing wrong, per se, with tests—except when they are the sole tools used to determine judgments about schools or teachers.

• Why do we think that sitting young children in front of computer screens is an adequate substitution for a real education? Technology can be a wonderful way to enrich student learning, but can not replace excellent teachers, or the social and emotional benefits of schooling.

• Why do we endorse a curricular model that privileges science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) when a comprehensive education has always included the humanities, arts and physical education (STEAM)? Again, there is nothing wrong with math or science—but education is about helping kids develop in well-rounded ways, not along narrow, one size fits all corridors.

• When did the notion of learning morph from the building and nurturing of personal relationships between teachers and learners into a mere information transaction, a simple matter of deposits and withdrawals?

• Why are we satisfied with secondary school music programs that engage less than 20% of the student population, and offer only a limited "menu" of ensembles and classes?

• Why does the student population in our programs in too many places not reflect the diversity of our schools and communities? And what are we doing to address this disparity?

I think that the answers to these questions have to do with getting the education policies to match the quality of music programs in our schools—and here are a few recommendations in that regard:

Policy Recommendations

 • insist that elementary music be a required subject for every child--currently only around 44-46 US states "require" elementary music, and in many of those states the requirements aren't strong enough (music classes are only part of a requirement from a larger set of subjects or disciplines)

 • require that music be taught by certified, qualified music educators—I recommend that classroom teachers with K-5 or K-8 "all subjects" certification not be assigned to teach music, and that only qualified, certified music educators be responsible for delivering music instruction in schools

 • restore the cuts that have been made to music programs, especially in urban schools, which have occurred as a result of the narrowing of curriculum forced by testing requirements imposed through policy legislation

 • restore music supervisor positions in the public schools--these individuals could be responsible for conducting and/or advising on matters of music teacher evaluation, and coordinate/implement curriculum changes in the schools

 • enhance and expand music offerings in middle and high schools beyond the traditional band, orchestra and chorus model--include more folk, popular, world and vernacular music-making classes, more technology, and more creative music making (song writing, improvisation, composition, arranging, creating cover tunes) in the school curriculum

We also have some work to do in creating a more inclusive profession that welcomes a more diverse student population, teaching force and curriculum in our schools. To that end, we need to…

\* Make sure that our bands, orchestras and choruses "look like" the population of students in the schools in which they exist. That may mean providing instruments for students who can't afford to rent them, subsidizing private lessons, etc.

\* Improve access for urban and rural students to the same number and quality of music offerings that their peers in more affluent schools do

\* provide scholarships for summer study for underrepresented minority students, free registration for solo and ensemble events for students from low SES schools, and work to identify and support minority students who are interested in becoming music teachers

\* MEAs should examine their lists of "required solo and ensemble music" to make sure that black, Hispanic, Indigenous Peoples, women and LGBT composers are represented on these lists.

\* Conference and festival coordinators should be encouraged to invite a diverse roster of guest conductors and clinicians to work with students at regional and all state festivals. These persons are often important mentors and role models for our students, and we need to make sure that our students "see" persons who look like them on podiums and in classrooms at these events. It is also important for "majority" students to have the opportunity to work with a more diverse array of guest conductors and clinicians, who often bring unique backgrounds and perspectives to their teaching.

\* Establish recruitment programs to identify promising young minority music teachers, and encourage these teachers to pursue leadership positions in their local, state and national music education associations.

\* Reduce or eliminate obstacles in our college and university music programs in terms of audition procedures that make it more difficult for minority students to be accepted to these institutions to pursue music degrees.

Our schools and colleges must change our mindset, and finally begin to consider the issues of race, diversity, equity, and inclusion as opportunities for growth and understanding, instead of as problems to be solved, and begin to enter the current reality of music teaching and learning in our schools.

I’ll leave you with one more quote from our friend, Elliott Eisner: “Our schools, teachers, and students might be a lot better off if schools embraced the idea that education means learning what to do when you don’t know what to do.”

This, to me, is the great power and promise of music in our schools—because, when taught well, music can provide the means for our students to figure out what to do, when they don’t know what to do. And that should be what we want for all of our children.

Thank you.