Welcome to the Music in Our Schools Month edition. This is my 31st year in education and I remember all of the music experiences that happen in March of each year. Whether it was performing in Albany with my choir, school musicals, marching band competitions, special MIOSM concerts in our districts, or The World's Largest Concert for which everyone tuned in at one time and sang together nationwide, this was a time where music took the lead in our schools.

I remember it fondly and also remember the countless meetings, speeches and presentations to Boards of Education in regard to the importance of music education in the overall teaching and learning in our schools. So, I want to remind us all about the advocacy that goes along with the thing we do so well, which is performing, conducting, and teaching in classroom settings.

What is advocacy?

So what is advocacy? It is what we do every time our students perform or we speak about our programs. It is creating new initiatives or new emerging ensembles. It is when we create something that changes a child’s life or just enhances her life and everyday learning.

From the time of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), we have always been looking through the window fighting to be CORE in regard to teaching the well-rounded child. We know that music enhances the learning processes in the brain, and while we can support music education increasing students’ test scores in relation to ELA and math, we also know that we MUST teach music for the sake of music. We must get to a place where schools understand that music education stands alone in the process of teaching the well-rounded child.

You might ask why I keep bringing up the well-rounded term and that is because the new law that took over NCLB is Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which states that we must educate the well-rounded child inclusive of music and the arts. Music stands alone! ESSA states that to be well-rounded, we need many levels of learning and it includes music and the arts. The law infers that we have to teach music to our children if they are going to be well-rounded and successful in life. So, therefore, we do not need to connect to why music will help students learn math, science, and ELA. We learn music for the sake of music. That is our advocacy.

Ways to advocate

Now please don’t think I am naïve and think this is all we need to say. Many districts and programs still need to advocate and continue in the realm of what music does for the learner. Many district leaders need to be taught the language of the new law and until then need to be reminded of the importance of music education.

Here are my thoughts for advocacy using a mnemonic device of the word.

A stands for “Activate.” The brain activates the hormone cortisol when listening and performing music. During my dissertation research, I read a lot about how music impacts the learner and the brain theories around music listening and music performance. The cortisol in the brain is exponentially increased when listening to music, and that hormone is then increased three- or four-fold when actually performing music. We have scientific proof that music performance changes the brain, the psyche, and the life of the musician. We can use this to advocate for music education in the schools. We can prove scientifically that music changes children’s lives.

D stands for “Develop.” Develop new initiatives that advocate for you. Do you have a parent organization? Do you have student advocacy groups? Do you have a Tri-M chapter in your school? If you do, embrace them and energize them to get in your communities and spread the word. If you don’t, build them. Create systems where more than just you are talking about the impact music is having on the children. If you need help with any of these, check our website (www.nyssma.org) or reach out to me and I will point you in the right direction. Student voice might be the strongest voice in your district. Empower your students to advocate with respect for the program, the adults around them, and the program they love.

V stands for “Voice.” We have to build our collective voice advocating for every child to have a sequential
music education throughout New York State. Together our voice is stronger than alone. There is a message we have to continue to share and that is that music changes lives and children HAVE to have the opportunities to have such an experience. Without a music education, children will not be all that they can possibly attain to be.

**O is for “Organized.”** It is not easy juggling your home life, your professional life, and advocating for all of it. You have to be organized. There are no excuses like, “I was just too busy to invite my congresswoman,” “I would love to have my students perform in Albany during Music In Our School’s Month, but we already have too much on the schedule,” or “I would love to go to the NYSSMA conference but my concert is in two weeks.” Set your schedule in August and include how, where, and when you are going to advocate.

**C is “Curriculum.”** We should all be trained in the new New York State Standards based on the National Core Art Standards. It is imperative that we use these standards to advocate for music education. We are part of the well-rounded education that ESSA insists schools support. One thing we can do better in our advocacy is to be part of educating our children and not be in addition to, and the way we frame this conversation will move us in this direction. When we know our professional language and use our language, we are advocating in the professional organization. Remember you know your curriculum better than anyone in your school district so speak your profession and its importance with the curriculum language.

**A is “Amplify.”** We need to turn the volume up on our advocacy. Here are three ideas but there are many more.
1. Going to Albany during Joe Sugar Day.
2. Visit board meetings even when it is not in order to support your program so the board doesn’t see you as a fair-weather friend.
3. Get guests like your superintendent, Senator, or Booster President to introduce your concerts.

Honestly anyone who can speak about the importance of a sequential music education and the impact it has on your children is success. Shout from the highest mountain or, even better, have someone else do the shouting.

**C is “Communication.”** It is not just about communicating but, similar to Amplify, it is to whom and how we communicate. During No Child Left Behind era, we were not core and always looking through the window in hopes our school understood the importance of a music education. Now we are part of the ESSA law but our leaders need reminders and, in many cases, need education. How we communicate is so important. When you go into a meeting with an “ask,” make sure you already have the answers. You have so many opportunities with the new standards and ESSA law – use them and know them. You have to be the smartest one in the room.

**Y is for “Yourself.”** You are the most important aspect of advocacy. You HAVE to take care of your health and well-being if you are expected to take care of the hundreds in front of you on a daily basis. Take time away from work to embrace your passions and do what you need to do to make yourself healthy. We know that if we have nothing left in the gas tank, it hurts everyone inside and outside of our profession. You need to advocate for your own health if you are going to advocate for others. Remember, if there is oxygen loss in an airplane, you have to put the mask on YOU before helping others.

No matter what you do, please remember you can’t do this alone. Your professional organization will help wherever you need it. Check out NYSSMA.org for information on the new Standards, Tri-M, Joe Sugar Day in Albany, and other aspects of advocacy. When you need extra special help or answers to advocacy questions email Advocacy@nyssma.org.

We are on this journey together. Know that I live this every day, and if you ever need anything, please reach out to me. Together we are stronger and music MUST be part of the well-rounded education, which must include a sequential music education. If I had my way, students would be mandated to have music every day of every year like English, math, history etc.

See you in Albany!

David

“Music produces a kind of pleasure which human nature cannot do without.” —Confucius