

Telling the Story: Proactive is Better than Reactive

With the reduction of funding for educational programs on many levels, and with the unprecedented pressures put on schools, districts and states by the No Child Left Behind Act, *responsibility for retaining arts programs* rests with every arts educator, every parent and all community members.

It's Always about Politics

Today's education and political environments require the **need to demonstrate political skills when advocating for the importance of arts programs**. We need to **train ourselves and others in school politics to ensure student-centered decisions**. Parents and community members must be reminded that the school district belongs to them. It's much easier to **influence a decision that hasn't yet been made** (proactive) than to undo a decision (reactive) that the players within the system see as final. **The key to being proactive is to be informed and organized!**

Know the Process

- It is critical that you understand the **timeline and process by which decisions** are made in your school district. Your goal is to influence key decisions before they are made.
- Determine the normal practice in your district—who or what body is the **primary decision-maker, when do they make their decisions and where do they get their information?**
- Know what your **state law requires** regarding instruction and accreditation.
- Recognize the **distinction between decision-makers and decision drivers**. The decision-makers will nearly always take their cues from the decision drivers. Know what and/or who are the decision drivers in your district.
- **Waiting** until “something” happens can be **deadly**.

Power in Numbers

- Without the involvement of the community, **decisions tend to be driven by adult issues**—salary, teaching schedules, education reforms or money.
- Every individual in the community has a right to be involved in the process. This is the **major reason for organizing** a Fine Arts Support Group—to **broaden your political power**. Numbers speaking in a **unified voice** are much louder than a small group of angry parents.
- If the board and administration understand that the **majority of their constituents support** a strong arts program, they will be **less likely to make decisions that weaken those programs**.

Be Organized

- Start with arts educators. **Maintain unity.** A lack of unity makes teachers susceptible to the “divide-and-conquer” game.
- Recognize that the decision-making process is usually adult-centered and thus political. **Political situations require political solutions.**
- Expand your **parent support group.** Include parents of younger children who may not yet have had the opportunity to participate in arts programs.
- **Know the parents and community:** Who are the organizers, the persuaders and the speakers?
- Develop and maintain **communication mechanisms:** mailing lists; rapid-call telephone tree and e-mail tree; Web site; arts newsletter.
- **Maintain annual long-term statistical data** to provide a profile of student involvement and the financial viability of the program. (Refer to *Tips for Success*, #3.)
- **Celebrate accomplishments** of the program and **document** them for presentation to administration, parents and community in the form of **concert inserts** and an **annual report.** (Refer to *Tips for Success*, #11.)
- **Establish positive relationships** with members of the school board.
- Make sure there is **representation at all school board meetings;** review the agenda several days prior to the meeting.
- **Stay informed of all administrative proposals.** Communicate the content and possible impact to support groups.
- The parent group may choose to **recruit, support and elect school board members and legislators** who support arts education.
- Review *Tips for Success*, #12.

Remember:

- Arts educators **cannot afford to be isolationists.**
- Arts educators **must take time** to establish administrative, parental and community connections and relationships.
- Arts educators **must make unified decisions** that ensure an arts education for all students.
- Arts educators must **keep the focus on: “What is best for the students?”**

In a Time of Crisis . . .

- **Identify the issues:** Which are adult-centered? Which are student-centered? What is really driving the decision?
- **Separate the issues** and consider which ones are most important to the overall solution.
- **Define the issues** from the perspective of short- and long-term effects on students, curriculum and budget.
- **Examine each issue** carefully, looking for secondary issues. Are you dealing with educational reform, a financial crisis, legislative mandate or some other issue?
- **Where is the decision made?** Superintendent? Principal? School board?
- **Develop impact statements:** These are responses that demonstrate in tangible ways what the long-term effect of a proposal will be on student learning, the curriculum, student opportunities to participate and the district budget.
- **Never volunteer cuts to other programs!**

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