

Global Competition And Arts Education

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“How do we compare to the Japanese?” My head abruptly turned to the gentleman sitting behind me at a conference on arts education. He boldly asked how our students’ scores on arts education assessments compare to those of students in Germany, Korea, and even Hungary. I found this individual’s question shocking—but global competition has come knocking at our door. At that conference, in the company of arts educators and artists, there were many who actually believe that measuring, comparing, and, of all things, ranking is what arts education is all about. To quote any nine-year-old, “NOT.”

Why should I be surprised that some arts educators are concerned with how our test results compare? After all, we know about this country’s quest for “world-class standards of educational performance.” In fact, one of the six National Educational Goals/America 2000 proposals calls for U.S. students to be “first in the world in science and mathematics achievement.” And “global competition,” the latest sound-bite remedy for curing what ails our public schools, is now infecting—no, scratch that—affecting arts education. For example, a consortium of arts education associations (including MENC) recently received a \$250,000 grant from the U.S. Department of Education to create “world-class standards” for all the arts.


Using a world-market metaphor, our edu-

cational system is expected to keep America ahead of our “competitors.” But conquering our neighbors in the test-score Olympics is certainly not my idea of arts education. Nor, in my mind, is arts education about assess-

ment systems, uniform curriculum, or standards on international report cards.

In spite of the habitual chant heard at every Friday night high school football game in Texas (and I am sure elsewhere), “We’re #1” is not a strategy that will either save or improve the arts in our schools. We have moved from *A Nation at Risk*, pronouncing that a “rising tide of mediocrity...

threatens our very future,” to the latest federal initiative to improve schools: global competition.

There is a prevailing myth that American public schools are terrible, and their only salvation is the kind of radical reform so often touted by members of the business and political communities. I believe what is fundamental to improving teaching and learning in the arts is not global competition, but rather the production and use of serious scholarship. This and other issues of *The Quarterly Journal of Music Teaching and Learning* are not about developing America’s competitive edge in arts education; rather, we stand for this country’s best hope for the intellectual qualities necessary for educational improvement: inquiry, deliberation, curiosity, and critical analysis. 

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