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Source: Lehman, P. R. (1995, Summer). The national standards for music education: Meeting the challenges. *The Quarterly*, 6(2), pp. 5-13. (Reprinted with permission in *Visions of Research in Music Education*, 16(6), Autumn, 2010). Retrieved from <http://www-usr.rider.edu/~vrme/>

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The National Standards For Music Education: Meeting The Challenges

By Paul R. Lehman

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The K-12 curriculum in music has never been standardized to the extent that it has in math or science or the other

basic disciplines. It has not been standardized because there are no standardized tests that are widely used, nor has it been standardized by textbooks because some K-8 classrooms have no music textbooks. The classes that have textbooks tend to use them as sources of materials rather than courses of study to be followed page by page, and beyond grade 8 few textbooks exist. Instead, far more than in other basic disciplines, music teachers tend to teach what they are good at, what they consider most important, and what they perceive is most valued in their communities. As a result, when a student moves from one district to another or from one state to another, it is almost impossible for the new teacher to make any valid assumptions about what the student knows or is able to do based on his or her grade level.

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One purpose of the *National Standards for Arts Education*¹ is to close the door on the era in which the music curriculum depended

largely on the whims and idiosyncrasies of individual teachers, and open the door on an era in which there are generally accepted expectations concerning what all students know and are able to do. These expectations are stated explicitly in the standards for students in grades 4, 8, and 12. Naturally, there will be some diversity in emphasis, methodology, and repertoire from district to district, just as there is diversity in the population from district to district. Still, there should be general agreement on the types of skills and knowledge that are taught, and it should be possible for the first time for teachers to

make assumptions about the musical skills and knowledge of students who move into their districts.

This can happen, however, only if the standards are embraced by music educators and accepted by the public. The process has only begun, but the response of teachers to the standards has been generally very favorable. They recognize the usefulness of stan-

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dards as a basis for curriculum construction, for the development of teaching materials, and for the assessment of learning. In referring to the standards, teachers seem to be saying, in effect, "It's about time." Equally important, teachers recognize the untenable position they would be in if there were standards in the other basic disciplines, as there will be by 1996, but no standards in music. In short, music teachers may have concerns about some of the details, but they recognize the usefulness of the standards and appreciate the symbolic importance of their existence.

The public has responded favorably to the arts standards, also. Most citizens have readily grasped the common-sense notion that schools can be more effective if they have a clear vision of what they seek to achieve than if they do not. This is as true in music as in any other discipline. The lack of public controversy surrounding the music standards appears to reflect general support, though it may also contain an element of indifference.

The struggle for recognition and acceptance of music in the schools has seldom been easy. Teachers face major challenges as they seek to implement the standards, just as they have faced major challenges since 1837 when music was introduced into the curriculum in Boston. The purpose of this article is to describe some of the challenges faced by teachers in implementing the standards. Some of the more difficult challenges fall into three categories: (1) assessment, (2) resources, and (3) professional development. First, a few comments are offered concerning the state of the standards movement.

The Standards Movement

The movement for national standards, which seemed overwhelming in 1993-94, lost some of its momentum with the widespread attacks on the U.S. history standards following their release October, 1994, even though many of the critics emphasized that they still

supported the idea of standards. It lost further momentum amid the political bickering following the elections a few weeks later. This is unfortunate because the standards movement has been bipartisan from the beginning. It is also regrettable that arguments arising over details have monopolized the headlines and threatened to obscure the larger issues, where there remains considerable agreement.

Most of the standards-writing projects, including the arts project, received federal funding during the Bush Administration and were endorsed and continued by the Clinton Administration. Opponents have argued that by supporting the creation of national standards the federal government is seizing control of the schools and that students will be taught attitudes and values contrary to those of their parents. In fact, the states and local districts will remain firmly in control whether or not they adopt the standards, and there is nothing whatever in the arts standards about attitudes and values. This is not because attitudes and values are unimportant to arts educators, but because they are considered to be by-products of arts instruction rather than outcomes to be specified in the standards.

Nevertheless, arguments such as these have successfully discredited "outcomes-based" education in several states. The truth is that some of the outcomes specified in those states were indeed so vague that no one could tell precisely what they meant. They could not possibly serve as a basis for curriculum nor be evaluated satisfactorily, and to that extent the critics' fears were justified. Most of the arguments advanced against standards simply do not apply to the arts standards, but there is a very real danger that criticisms of standards in certain disciplines or abstract, all-encompassing criticisms could adversely affect the movement for standards in all disciplines.

It is not yet clear how the standards move-

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ment will be affected by the actions of the 104th Congress. The Congress will likely make some revisions in the *Goals 2000: Educate America Act*, but it is not likely to undo the accomplishments that matter most to music educators. The standards movement is not about to collapse at the national level; but even if it were, it will not collapse at the state level. Sooner or later most states will either adopt the national standards or develop their own. Many are doing so already. We music educators want the states to include music among the disciplines in which they adopt standards. The national standards provide a model for them to use. It is a model of high quality and one that has earned legitimacy and credibility as a result of the inclusiveness of the consensus-building process by which it was developed.

The states are free to adopt the national standards, to modify them, or to ignore them. They have always had those options, and they will continue to have them regardless of how strong the standards movement is at the national level—or how weak. The only difference is that the stronger the movement is at the national level, the more difficult it will be for states to disregard or weaken recommended national standards, a danger to which the arts are especially vulnerable.

It makes little practical difference whether the emphasis remains on national standards in the coming months or whether it shifts to state-level standards. In either case, music educators should continue to push for adoption of the national standards at the state and local levels or for the adoption of state and local standards based on the national standards.

Assessment

Assessment has always been a challenge for music educators. On the one hand, we

music teachers have used performance-based assessment and other forms of authentic assessment as long as there has been music education. It is gratifying to see that the rest of the education community has finally discovered these assessment procedures that have been so useful to music educators for generations. On the other hand, music teachers have never been quite comfortable engaging in formal assessment of the non-performance aspects of music learning. The discomfort has arisen in part from dissatisfaction with the adequacy of the available assessment techniques, and from a lingering fear that what we are assessing is not necessarily what is most important but rather what is most easily assessed.

In any event, standards inevitably bring assessment to the center of the stage. Ways must now be found to determine whether or not students are demonstrating the skills and knowledge called for in the standards. Standards and assessment inescapably go hand-in-hand. This is true in every discipline.

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- (1) Precisely what does each standard mean?
- (2) What assessment techniques and instruments should be used?
- (3) How good is good enough?

Some of the uncertainty surrounding the meaning of the standards stems simply from ambiguities in our professional vocabulary. During the standards-development process it quickly became apparent to the Music Standards Task Force, which I chaired, that our profession lacks clear and widely accepted definitions of some of the basic terms we use. In teachers' reactions to early drafts of the standards there was a disconcerting lack of consistency in the use of such basic terms

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as elements, style, and rhythm. Style, for example, not only means different things to different people, but the same people use it to mean different things in different contexts. Standards require that words have commonly understood meanings. One wonders how such disciplines as chemistry and physics could have developed to their present state if chemists and physicists had been so lacking in unanimity on the precise meanings of basic terms.

In the standards the word "genre," for example, is used to mean style or category of music. Genre is not yet a household word among music educators, but there seemed to be no better term for that concept. Many words were avoided in the standards because their use was criticized on various grounds; these include, for example, world cultures, art music, classical music, Western and non-Western, judging, playing, and integrating [the arts]. Since autoharp is a brand name, the standards use the generic term "chorded zithers." One respondent commented "We have no chorded zithers; can we use autoharps?" As we learn to live with the standards we should try to become more precise and more uniform in our technical terminology.

Other questions arise from a lack of specificity about precisely what the student should do to show that the standard has been met. Even though standards in principle should be as specific as possible, the language in some of the standards is deliberately vague. That is because some skills and knowledge can be demonstrated in various ways, and the standards sought to use language that would allow the full range of acceptable alternatives. Many of the standards permit the teacher considerable freedom of choice in every detail.

Take, for example, achievement standard 9a for grades 5-8: "Students describe distinguishing characteristics of representative music

genres and styles from a variety of cultures."² Precisely what does that mean? How many distinguishing characteristics? How many music genres and styles, and how many cultures? Can the cultures all be Western in origin or is that insufficiently diverse? What truly distinguishes a steel drum band from a mariachi ensemble other than their instruments? Do jazz and blues count as two styles, or is blues simply a specific kind of jazz?

How good is good enough? Take another example, achievement standard 2a for grades 9-12: "Students perform with expression and technical accuracy a large and varied repertoire of instrumental literature with a level of difficulty of 4, on a scale of 1 to 6."³ The level of 4 provides a useful benchmark, once one becomes accustomed to that scale, but was a given performance expressive? Did it demonstrate technical accuracy? How large and how varied a repertoire is sufficient to meet the standard? It doesn't say.

Teachers and school districts are free to answer these questions as they think appropriate. This is consistent with the American tradition of local control of schools. One of the major concerns expressed by critics of standards is that they will result in a national curriculum and nationally standardized assessment. The music standards do not comprise a curriculum and they certainly do not impose standardized assessment. If they should ultimately result in high-quality curricula in every school, even curricula that are consistent from district to district, most teachers would consider that a virtue and not a fault.

On the other hand, wide variations in the criterion measures and the levels of acceptability tend to undermine the idea of national standards. A national standard should indeed be a *standard*, and it should be accepted *nationally*. If a performance in one district is considered to have met the standard but a performance at the same level in

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another district is considered not to have met the standard, can it truly be said that there is a standard? If the means for demonstrating achievement of a standard in one school is utterly different from that in another, can one have confidence in the claim that either has met the standard?

In order to address these concerns, MENC has undertaken to develop a set of performance standards. The performance standards and accompanying assessment strategies will describe basic, proficient, and advanced levels of proficiency for each achievement standard.

The basic level is intended to represent achievement that shows distinct progress, but has not yet reached the proficient level as called for in the national standards. The basic level may be thought of as a meaningful intermediate point or a significant way station enroute to the proficient level. It serves to distinguish between what is unacceptable and what is provisionally or marginally acceptable.

The proficient level represents, by definition, the level of achievement called for in the national standards. The proficient level should be achievable by most students given good teaching and adequate time. The goal of every school should be to provide a learning environment in which students achieve at this level.

The advanced level is intended to represent achievement significantly above the proficient level called for in the national standards. Achievement at the advanced level normally requires either unusual talent or time for learning beyond that available to the average student.

The performance standards are expected to be completed in 1996. They will not solve all of the teacher's problems related to assessment. Standards were never intended to make it possible for teachers to avoid all judgments. In order to be useful, standards

must be specific enough to be clear and helpful, but flexible enough to be adaptable to various local conditions. Assessment will continue to constitute a major challenge to music teachers in the foreseeable future.

Resources

The second set of challenges teachers face in seeking to implement the music standards revolves around resources. Many teachers and schools simply lack the resources they need to create and sustain an effective learning environment. These challenges typically take the form of an inadequate curriculum, insufficient time, poor scheduling practices, inadequate staff, inadequate materials and equipment, and poor facilities.

What resources are required to implement the standards? This question is answered in the MENC publication *Opportunity-to-Learn Standards for Music Instruction*,⁴ which specifies what is needed, in the collective judgment of the music education profession, with respect to curriculum and scheduling, staffing, materials and equipment, and facilities for preschool, elementary, middle, and high schools. *The Goals 2000: Educate America Act* encourages states to develop their own opportunity-to-learn standards, and MENC's publication is intended to give state departments of education and state music educators organizations a model that can be used as a basis for their efforts.

For many teachers the most pressing problem is a lack of instructional time. Where will schools find the time to meet the standards? One of the best answers to that question is provided by John Goodlad in his landmark book *A Place Called School*.⁵ Goodlad is a highly respected figure who has no ax to grind. The recommendations in his book are based on visits to more than 1000 classrooms over a period of three years and interviews with more than 27,000 teachers, parents, and

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students. Goodlad proposes that in a typical elementary school week of 23.5 hours, 1.5 hours be allocated each day to language arts and one hour to math. It is unlikely, he maintains, that children could benefit proportionately from more time than that. He further proposes that 2.5 hours each week be devoted to social studies, 2.5 hours to science, and 2.5 to health and physical education. "We still have 3.5 hours each week for the arts," he concludes with obvious satisfaction.⁶

At the secondary level, according to Goodlad, up to 18 percent of each student's program should be devoted to literature and languages, up to 18 percent to math and science, up to 15 percent each to social studies, vocational studies, and the arts; and up to 10 percent to physical education.⁷ This is the program for every student. The remaining 10 percent should be available to the individual student to pursue his or her special interests, which, of course, may include the arts.

The time is available. Any school that thinks otherwise has only to look at Goodlad's suggestions. If a school does not accept his suggestions, it may look at the models offered by any one of the many schools in every state that have no trouble finding the time. Time is a red herring. It's a false issue. A lack of will is masquerading as a lack of time.

The recent report of the National Education Commission on Time and Learning, titled *Prisoners of Time*, recognizes the arts among the core disciplines that every student should study.⁸ It urges a distinction between the academic day and the school day. The academic day, it says, should consist of at least 5 1/2 hours devoted to the core disciplines. The school day can include everything else the schools want to do in addition to the academic core but, of course, will require additional time beyond the 5 1/2 hours of the academic day.⁹ The Commission suggests that some of the activities schools want to offer will have to be sacrificed in order to maintain the academic day. What an irony!

Just a few years ago, the arts would probably have been among the so-called activities sacrificed to find time for the academic core. Now, according to the Commission, the arts are in the academic core for which other activities must be sacrificed. Music teachers should ensure that their administrators and their communities are aware of this recommendation.

Often the most important resources necessary to implement the standards is money. This is because money can buy the necessary teachers, time, materials, equipment, and facilities. Some schools already offer excellent programs, and in many of these schools the standards can be fully implemented with minimal additional cost. Yet in every school, regardless of the state of its current program, there are things that can be done to help implement the standards with no increase in resources. An eighth-grade general music teacher who has never before done so can introduce improvisation and composition into his or her classes. A high school choir director can emphasize the cultural and historical context of the music he or she chooses for a concert. An elementary teacher can explain to his or her students how music is used in the various cultures the class is studying in geography. These are small but positive steps toward implementing the standards that can be taken with no additional funding.

At the same time, there are also schools that offer disgracefully weak music programs or none at all, where there will be significant costs. This is what education reform is all about. It's easy to say that we want good quality schools, but are we willing to pay the price? This becomes the test of whether we're serious about education reform or whether our national soul-searching over education is empty rhetoric. Many states are facing major problems in funding their schools, but schools cannot be funded discipline by discipline. Music is one of the basics and should be funded by whatever

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method is devised for funding the other basics. It is totally unacceptable to support the English, math, and science programs from tax funds and the music program from candy sales and car washes.

Given the budget constraints many schools operate under, the changes necessary to implement the standards may have to be done gradually. This is perfectly reasonable. Let every district develop a five-year implementation plan. Perhaps we can't afford to do everything at once, but we can't afford to do nothing.

One important weapon available in the struggle to implement the standards is the *Goals 2000: Educate America Act*, which includes the arts among the disciplines in which every young American will demonstrate competence. This is an immensely important symbolic victory for arts education. Music educators have never before had such powerful support from the federal government, though we obviously have a long way to go before our vision becomes a reality.

In the long run the key to providing the necessary resources is mobilizing support at the local level and bringing pressure on the board of education and on the superintendent and principals. Ultimately the battle to implement the music standards will not be fought in Washington. It will not be fought in the state capitals either, though state actions can make the task easier or more difficult. The most important battles will be fought in every one of the nation's 13,398 school districts. It was through local pressure that music first made its way into America's schools, and it will be through local pressure that music will remain there.

Professional Development

The third set of challenges music teachers face in seeking to implement the national standards concerns the need for inservice

professional development. Though the general reaction of teachers to the standards has been very positive, some teachers are clearly uncomfortable with the thought of being asked to teach certain skills and knowledge that they have never before taught and perhaps never learned.

Most teachers see no particular problems with Standards 1 and 2, which deal with performance. As a profession, that's what we do best. In these two standards teachers find many of the skills they teach every day. The same is true of Standard 5, which deals with reading and notating music. There is little in Standard 5 that's new. Similarly, general music teachers in the elementary and middle schools tend to teach most of the skills and knowledge called for in Standard 3, which concerns improvisation; and in Standard 4, which involves composition. Standard 6 deals with listening to, analyzing, and describing music; and Standard 7 deals with evaluating. These standards are things that music teachers do regularly, though there may be some specifics addressed in the standards that are not routinely taught.

What some teachers probably do not emphasize is understanding relationships between music and other disciplines, as called for in Standard 8; and understanding music in relation to history and culture, as specified in Standard 9. These are topics with which many teachers need help. Also, there is an emphasis throughout the standards on diverse genres of music and on music of various cultures of the world. These are matters with which many of us will need help because they were not emphasized when we were in school. The world is a different place today than it was then. Keeping current through professional development activities is just as important for teachers as it is for physicians, lawyers, and other professionals.

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The standards document says two things that are relevant to this aspect of implementation. First, it says that "every course in music, including performance courses, should provide instruction in creating, performing, listening to, and analyzing music, in addition to focusing on its specific subject matter."¹⁰ That's an idea from the comprehensive musicianship project of 25 years ago, and it's still valid. At the high school level the standards claim to be intended "for students who have completed courses of study involving relevant skills and knowledge,"¹¹ so that ultimately it is up to the teacher to determine to what extent, for example, the improvisation or composition standards apply to students who elect band or orchestra.

The idea of teaching improvisation to a middle school orchestra or composition to a high school band may still seem far-fetched to some band and orchestra directors, but there are others who are doing precisely that every day. There is repertoire for large ensembles that requires improvisation, and there are ways to teach the principles and practice of composition in large ensembles. In fact, every one of the standards is being taught effectively by some teachers already; what is needed is to give these teachers an opportunity to share their skills and knowledge with their colleagues.

Virtually all teachers can teach to the standards immediately because there's nothing in them that is totally new. But to embrace them fully, in all of their subtle details, will usually require some personal commitment and some inservice development. There is a good chance that the inservice help needed may become available because a parallel need exists in all of the other disciplines of the curriculum. Indeed, the standards movement will require an entirely new approach to inservice professional development. This will involve relying less on colleges and universities and more on teachers helping other

teachers within school districts and through consortia of school districts. National and state professional organizations, too, will play a major role. Indeed, the standards movement cannot succeed unless extensive new opportunities for professional development are made available.

Meanwhile, the standards have already had an impact on the professional literature that contributes in valuable ways to the inservice development of music teachers. Since the release of the standards, the *Music Educators Journal*, *Teaching Music*, and many of the state music educators journals have been filled with articles by teachers offering ideas and suggestions concerning their implementation. Conference sessions and single-focus meetings have been devoted to the standards. The National Coalition for Music Education has made available *Music for a Sound Education*, a "Tool Kit" containing booklets, brochures, videotapes, statements, and papers to aid in promoting the standards and music education in general. MENC has issued a series of standards-related publications and is preparing a set of booklets containing teaching examples for a variety of instrumental and vocal specializations. And advertisers are claiming that their materials reflect the national standards.

Coda

Of course, there are other obstacles to the implementation of the standards as well. One difficulty is that each of the dozen-odd sets of standards currently under development will no doubt serve as the basis for a claim by that discipline to a larger share of the time and budget of the schools. This is occurring at a time when the fiscal resources available to many schools are stable or in some cases diminishing. It is unrealistic to think that a reconciliation of the standards in the various disciplines can be achieved if every school district is left to its own devices.

Some states and districts are obviously waiting until standards are completed in most of the basic disciplines in order to deal with all of them at once. Who will lead the way in this task of reconciliation? No one knows at this point.

During the period that the music standards were under development drafts were distributed widely on two occasions and comments invited. The most frequent reaction from teachers to the initial draft was "Fine, but I don't have time to teach all of this." The number of standards has since been reduced substantially, but this opinion may still persist to some extent. The answer is that the standards do not represent something that teachers are expected to do in addition to everything they are doing already. The skills and knowledge reflected in the standards are expected to be woven into what teachers presently do. The standards are intended to provide direction and focus for teachers' efforts and not to superimpose another layer of subject matter. It is true that in many schools music teachers do not have the time they need, but the standards can provide leverage for seeking more time and resources. This can be accomplished by calling attention to the acute mismatch between what the schools claim to expect and the time and resources they provide.

Later, during the standards-development process, public hearings were held across the nation. At this stage, the dominant reaction seemed to be "This is great, but how will schools be forced to implement the standards?" The answer is that schools cannot be forced to implement them. The standards are voluntary. Ideally, the standards will be of good enough quality that schools will want to implement them, but ultimately implementation can only be the result of community support, just as school music programs themselves are the result of community support.

In the final analysis, the success of the standards movement, and to some extent the success of education reform, will depend in large measure on the degree to which teachers are able to surmount the challenges they face in implementing the national standards in their districts. Acceptance of the standards

by the public is equally important, but in one sense that is simply another of the challenges teachers face. Perhaps persuading the public to accept the standards ought not to be a responsibility of teachers, but for practical purposes it is. No one has claimed that the task will be easy — only that it will be necessary if music programs are to survive and flourish.

The standards are not perfect, but they represent a reasonable and appropriate reflection of the aspirations not only of music educators, but also of the many diverse constituencies that participated in the consensus-building process. The standards movement in general, and the music standards in particular, provide an unprecedented opportunity to rebuild and expand school music programs, including those that have been cut back in recent years. The inclusion of the arts in the *Goals 2000: Educate America Act*, among the disciplines in which every young American will demonstrate competence, sets the stage for a renaissance of arts education in America. Our success in the coming decade will depend on our ability to deal with the challenges we face in implementing the standards.

Notes

1. *National Standards for Arts Education* (Reston, Va.: Music Educators National Conference, 1994).
2. *Ibid.*, 45.
3. *Ibid.*, 59.
4. *Opportunity-To-Learn Standards for Music Instruction* (Reston, Va.: Music Educators National Conference, 1994).
5. John Goodlad, *A Place Called School* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1983).
6. *Ibid.*, 134.
7. *Ibid.*, 286-287.
8. National Education Commission on Time and Learning, *Prisoners of Time*, (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1994) p 30.
9. *Ibid.*, 32.
10. *National Standards for Arts Education*, 42, 59.
11. *Ibid.*, 53

