Viewpoint From Mitchell Robinson  
Associate Professor and Chair of the Music Education Department, MSU College of Music

Response to Lansing School District’s elimination of teacher positions

I am writing to provide some perspective on the recent decision to eliminate all elementary music, art and physical education teaching positions from the Lansing School District budget. First, I would like to express my empathy and support for Lansing’s Superintendent, Dr. Yvonne Caamal Canul, the members of the Lansing School Board, the Lansing School Education Association, and the music, art and PE teachers in the city’s schools, who find themselves in an extremely difficult economic position due to circumstances entirely outside of their own control. This situation has created enormous tensions between teachers and administrators, and even among teachers themselves. However, the decision to eliminate all elementary music, art and PE teaching positions from Lansing’s schools is the wrong decision for the following reasons.

Music, when taught well, is a powerful antidote to today’s “teach to the test,” assessment-driven culture. Because music, when taught sequentially by qualified, certified music teachers, offers the very qualities that employers say they are looking for in the workforce, and for what school leaders emphasize in their mission and vision statements: critical thinking, teamwork, problem-solving skills, and creativity. Far from being a “frill” or an “extra,” music is a core academic subject as defined in the “Goals 2000: Educate America Act,” and this status was reaffirmed again in the 2001 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, also known as No Child Left Behind.

Further, NCLB requires that highly-qualified (i.e., certified) educators teach any subject listed as core content. If we agree that excellent teachers are the most important in-school factor when it comes to delivering a high-quality instructional program, then the decision to ask Lansing’s classroom teachers to add music, art and physical education to their already heavy schedules is a questionable strategy for providing a “world class” educational program.

The district claims that they are not eliminating elementary music from the schools, but merely “reorganizing” the music program, and “contracting out those services to community artists.” Music educators recognize and value the contributions of our colleagues from the arts community in supporting and enhancing sequential music instruction for our students, and welcome them into our classrooms on a regular basis. But as Rachel Goslin, the Executive Director of the President’s Committee on the Arts and Humanities, says, “While we understand the complex landscape of economics and accountability facing educational stakeholders today, eliminating arts program or certified arts educator positions can not be justified by substituting general classroom teachers or teaching artists for this core role.”

We also believe children in Lansing’s schools deserve the same access to high quality music instruction, provided by certified music teachers, that their peers in the suburbs receive. A report from the National Center for Education Statistics indicates that while 94 percent of elementary schools provided instructional time for music in the 2009-2010 school year, access to arts education is divided along class lines. Secretary of Education Arnie Duncan notes this disparity, stating, “The arts opportunity gap is widest for children in high-poverty schools. This is absolutely an equity issue and a civil rights issue.”

Michigan State University College of Music • 102 Music Building • East Lansing, MI 48824  
P: 517-353-9958 • F: 517-432-7081
All of us in Michigan are only too aware of the economic difficulties that have befallen our state in the last several years. We have all felt the impact of the recession’s realities in every aspect of our lives. The good news is that the Lansing School District has other options that can better serve student learning. Rather than making wholesale program cuts to specific core programs such as music, art and PE, we can make reductions so that every area will take a fair share of the budget cuts, and create solutions that, while not ideal, do avoid the devastating impact of stunting student growth and development. As Dr. John Benham has shown in his work on “reverse economics,” cutting the arts and PE is a false economy. With creative scheduling, arts and PE teachers can continue offering a core curriculum to large numbers of children compared to that of teachers of other subjects.

Michigan State University’s College of Music and our partners in the local arts community stand ready to provide support and enrichment to the children in our region’s schools, as we have for years. But as Goslins says, “the cornerstones in a truly integrated and effective arts education program are the certified educators in each school.” We look forward to working with the leaders of Lansing’s schools to reach a solution that better meets the needs of the district’s students.

Mitchell Robinson
Associate Professor and Chair
Music Education Department
College of Music
Michigan State University

###