

Education today is, in so many ways, not the same as it was when I started teaching 17 years ago. Students struggle with different concepts now than when I first started teaching. Their ability to infer information is limited. They identify themselves as visual learners and have extreme difficulty reading and writing to learn. They struggle more than ever with personal relationships and if possible, prefer to disappear into a screen or a set of headphones rather than interact with another person. Their attention spans have become shorter and shorter over time.

And yet, in so many ways, teaching is exactly the same. Children come to school with the same need to be fed, to be safe, to discover something new. They have a desire to learn and a longing to be around those people that can show them how to discover their own passion. They seek to connect to someone that can meet them where they are at and can guide, lead, and help them grow into the person they wish to become. They need teachers that can take the time to work with them. They want teachers that can open their eyes to new ideas and concepts. They wish to grow as much as we wish to guide them.

When I first started teaching in 1998, I believed fervently that music education was as vital to each student's development as math, reading, science, English, and history were, and I stand by that even more today. The constant drumbeat of "High-Stakes Testing, Common Core State Standards, and STEM" resounds off the educational walls of America. We are constantly inundated with reports of America's failing education system and how we are slipping in the ranks of worldwide scholastic ratings. We demand of our educators that they prepare students to be independent thinkers, life-long learners, and educated members of a democratic society who can work collaboratively, think creatively, and live successfully in a fast-paced changing world in which 65% of the jobs these students will pursue have yet to be created.

And then we take students out of the classroom and we test them. And we test them again. And we test them yet again. We focus on aligning our lessons to the standards and to the test. We strive to make sure our students score "Proficient". And in doing so, I believe, we lose our focus on what our students truly need. They must be prepared to problem solve, yes, but they must also be independent thinkers capable of going beyond book learning to reach out and make contact with humanity. They must be prepared to adjust to life in an ever-changing world where tomorrow's discoveries will impact their lives greatly. They must understand the power of collaboration and realize that by working together they can achieve so much more. They need to feel that their contributions are worthy, and that they have the skills necessary to navigate through an unknown future.

In the micro culture of my band room, however, today's current assessment-centered interpretation of education is altered. Students walk in, put cell phones away and take out instruments. They discuss with their peers how their evening went last night and what the day might bring. They interact with each other on a human level. They sit down to warm up and they randomly get into groups to play songs together. Then rehearsal begins. We collaborate. We increase our literacy skills. We build upon our listening skills. We make musical decisions as an ensemble by studying the history of a piece and interpreting the many notes and symbols we see. We analyze phrases, melodies, harmonies, and structures. We play and make mistakes. We fix them and we play again, and again, and again. We practice and dedicate ourselves to the team and to not just what notes are on the page, but to making music. My ensemble takes great pride in rehearsing the "slow pieces." Their goal, each and every time, is to make music more "musical." They want to reach out and touch the humanity in their audience and themselves. And every day, they strive do all of this better than the day before.

They understand that this doesn't happen by magic. They see that the strongest players are there because they have practiced over and over again. They know that they have to learn their notes, rhythms and scales in order to be technically prepared to undertake whatever piece of music might be placed in front of them next. And they know that they are leaders. They believe that as they build their own skills, they have a responsibility to share what they have learned with others around them. It is not unusual to have an upperclassmen request to work with a younger student in a practice room to help them learn a part. It's common to see older students assist the younger ones in cleaning the room after a rehearsal or performance. It's not surprising to see one student give another a card after a job well done, or a high five after they finally are able to play that difficult passage. It's perfectly normal to see students preparing challenging music in order to pass an audition for a community or state level ensemble. They want to make themselves and their world better.

Is this not what we strive for in our communities? Is this not what we wish our students to do throughout their lives? We want them to work hard, to become passionate, to always thirst for knowledge, to be diligent about constant

improvement, to be human. We want them to contribute to the welfare of those around them-to recognize a need and step up to help. We wish for them to pursue their passion, share their joy, and reach their goals.

This is why I think the issue of keeping music education in our schools is so important. If we continue forward with a focus on testing and noble but misguided education reform, we will produce generations of children that can complete math problems and science labs but have no creative thinking skills, collaborative abilities, or joy. Music MUST be a valued part of every child's education.

This is why I continue to teach in the manner I do. Why I arrange for master musicians to come and work with my students and why I guest teach at other schools. This is why I spend hours on researching music, ordering equipment, and running rehearsals. I believe that the work I do pushes students to move beyond testing, math problems, and science labs. I believe that what I do encourages students to connect to those subjects, their peers, and the world around them in ways that will never be assessed on any test. I believe that music education, and for that matter, arts education, fills the gaps that our students fall into. I believe that through hands on learning, through hard work, practice, repetition, and passion that we can truly provide a child with all he or she needs to be successful.

There are many issues in education that need to be addressed. As a nation, we have the responsibility to make sure our future generations are prepared for any opportunity that life may hand them. By keeping music education in our public schools, we continue to prepare students for these prospects. It is important that we remember this need as we strive to reform our schools, increase our standards, and raise the goals for learning in New Mexico and across the nation.