

Music Advocacy Corner – Music Educators Working With Parents  
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Margie has taught at Sunny Dale Elementary School for 6 years. During that time, she has developed a successful music program based on the Kodály method of music education. Her principal recently informed her of plans to reduce contact time in music from 60 minutes/cycle to 40. She is shocked by this announcement. How can she continue this quality program with so little time with her students?

Later that day, Margie discusses this situation with a member of the parent advisory committee. Word spreads quickly and by the next week the principal and superintendent each have stacks of letters on their desks speaking to the importance of music in children's lives. As a result, the administration reverses its decision and maintains the status quo.<sup>1</sup>

Margie advocates for music education by nurturing relationships with students, parents and guardians.<sup>2</sup> **By involving parents in each child's interactions with music,** she extends music education beyond the instruction time allotted in the school's curriculum. She employs Epstein's (1995) six types of involvement to increase parental engagement in children's educational experiences: 1. communicating; 2. parenting; 3. volunteering, 4. learning at home; 5. decision making, and; 6. collaborating with community. What follows is a summary of how Margie uses these approaches to enrich the musical lives of her students.<sup>3</sup>

### Communicating

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<sup>1</sup> This scenario based on one presented by McCallum (2006).

<sup>2</sup> The author refers to parents throughout the remainder of this piece; the underlying intent is to reach those people (parents and/or guardians) who are most important in a student's life.

<sup>3</sup> Margie is not a particular person but a composite representing the ways in which music educators may forge relationships with parents.

Each school year begins with an informal meeting in which Margie provides parents with information about the music program, her teaching practice, and student expectations (Smar, 2002). She talks about the philosophy of Kodály-inspired teaching as a way to further parents' understanding of the importance music plays in their children's lives. She explains the tools of the method (for example: tonic solfa, hand signs, rhythm duration symbols) and the scope and sequence upon which students learn the signs and symbols of traditional music notation. Parents ask questions about the music program; Margie asks questions about the backgrounds and interests of the children in the program. Throughout the school year, parents receive newsletters updating the students' progress in music and informing them of upcoming musical events in the school and community.

The two major concerts Margie plans each year provide students with opportunities to refine their performance of selected repertoire and to present these works in front of an audience. These performances also provide an avenue for students to demonstrate how they learned these pieces. Margie asks students to sing themes of certain pieces in solfa or to clap selected rhythms featured in these works. Students provide listeners with historical or analytic information of the repertoire performed (Burton, 2004).

Margie also invites parents and guardians to take part in the regular activities of the music classroom on special open-house days. By participating in music, parents gain insight into music education through experience; children delight in teaching their elders what they have learned in music class (Burton, 2004). This is a win-win situation within which Margie successfully advocates for a strong music program at Sunny Dale School.

### Parenting

Margie explains the importance of practice for improving skills in music. She highlights areas of the music curriculum where students may practice at home and how parents may help their child by allocating an area of the home where this practice may occur on a regular basis (Smar, 2002). Ever mindful that not all families have such facilities, Margie provides an area of the school where such practice may occur so all children have equal opportunities to learn.

### Volunteering

Margie attaches a volunteer form to with the Fall newsletter asking parents (and other interested family members) to indicate musical interests or talents and times when they might be able take part in the musical community at Sunny Dale School. These volunteers enrich the curriculum. Grandparents teach songs and singings games of their youth; parents introduce students to folksongs and share artifacts from a variety of cultures; family and friends provide costumes for concert performances. These volunteers are recognized for their efforts with “Helping Hands” rewards at the annual Spring concert.

### Learning at Home

Margie urges parents to view each child’s music making in a positive light and to celebrate their musical successes (Smar, 2002). She involves parents in their child's learning by attaching checklists related to assigned tasks and signature forms to children's work. For example, after grade 5 students complete compositions for recorder, each child is required to play the composition for an adult in their home. The completed signature form is included in the child's portfolio along with the notated composition. Through this

process, adults are apprised of their child's progress and children share their accomplishments with important people in their lives.

Margie provides students with extra-curricular assignments to extend their engagement with music beyond the classroom. For example, she lists websites in the newsletters along with ideas of how children and parents might browse the web together. Based on the school's non-directed listening program (Brummitt & Taylor, 1996), she prepares listening packets (compact discs and accompanying questions or listening maps) that children may complete at home. Parents are encouraged to engage in these listening experiences with their children. Ever conscious that all homes may not be equipped with compact disc players and web connections, she makes space available for these activities at the school.<sup>4</sup>

#### Decision Making

Margie promotes parent involvement in the school-wide music community -- for example, planning performance outings or trips to the symphony. Leadership opportunities involve parents in the overall well being of music education in the school, thereby increasing the likelihood that these individuals will advocate for music within the school and community. Margie notes that successful collaboration requires that decisions are made with the best interests of all students in mind (Smar, 2002).

#### Collaborating with Community

Margie provides parents with information about music events and resources available in the community. Many parents of students in her school want to enroll their children in private music studios; Margie provides them with a contact list of private

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<sup>4</sup> It may not be possible to provide school space for these activities. Nonetheless, teachers must be conscious that not all students will have equal access to the equipment referred to here.

piano, voice, and recorder teachers (Smar, 2002). She also distributes brochures for the Suzuki strings program offered at the local conservatory. She shares information about upcoming musical performances at local schools and churches as well as events at art galleries and museums in the community (Smar, 2002). Numerous parents and students take advantage of these occasions and appreciate the time and effort required to bring these opportunities to their attention.

### Conclusion

Margie's story demonstrates how parental support builds advocacy for music education. A single teacher may not be able to apply all of the strategies described here. This vignette does, however, offer many suggestions for building positive relationships with the parents and guardians of today's students. Congratulations to the readers who have employed these strategies; best wishes to those who plan to implement the techniques suggested here. Enjoy the opportunities that these relationships afford and the benefits that such advocacy brings to your students and to the music program in your school (Bobetsky, 2003).

## References

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