

High-Stakes Standardized Testing and Secondary Music Programs: Impacts and Solutions

Introduction

The pressures that schools face as a result of high-stakes testing have adverse effects on content areas other than math and language arts. Music teachers struggle with lost instructional time and with being asked to incorporate supports for tested content areas, often in ways that are burdensome and do not integrate smoothly with the existing music performance curriculum. How can literacy and math supports, particularly writing, be included in large ensemble rehearsals in ways that enhance the curriculum?

Literature Review

- Effects of high-stakes testing on music programs include decreases in instructional time and course offerings and constraints on elective opportunities for low-performing students.
- Enrollments of already underrepresented minority groups in music programs have dropped further.
- Music teachers spend professional development time reviewing data on standardized assessments that they have no role in administering.
- Music teachers are asked to provide math and literacy supports during music class.
- Music teacher attitudes towards literacy instruction are mixed; many feel they are not qualified to teach outside their content area.
- Including carefully planned activities can both provide literacy instruction and enrich students' connection with repertoire being studied.
- Literacy/writing activities in music class can also help foster critical thinking and develop college- and career-ready and 21st-Century skills and fulfill National Core Arts Standard #11: Relate artistic ideas with societal, cultural, and historical context to deepen understanding.

Study Design

Part one of the study was a survey of Albuquerque Public Schools (APS) secondary music teachers to find out whether conditions described in the literature are reflective of reality for teachers in the district. Questions were designed to highlight the requirement of literacy instruction during the music teacher's day as well as disruptions caused by the administration of standardized tests. A section for anecdotes about the intersection of testing and music programs was also included. The survey was sent to 96 teachers representing all middle and high schools in APS as well as all music disciplines (band, choir, guitar, and orchestra). Responses were anonymous.

The second part of the study was a writing-integrated curriculum used with students in the Madison Middle School Symphonic Band. The curriculum centered on a theme that informed repertoire selection. The writing and discussion activities that were added to the usual performance-based curriculum helped students gain a deeper understanding of the repertoire by connecting the pieces to their cultural and historical context. The use of this repertoire and the designed writing activities explicitly fulfilled National Core Arts Standard #11 (referenced above) and #6: Convey meaning through the presentation of artistic work.

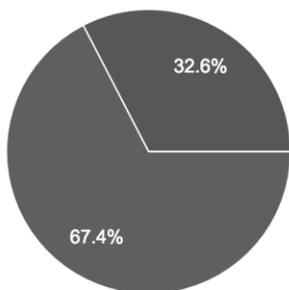
Madison Middle School serves 733 6th-8th-grade students in the near Northeast Heights area of Albuquerque, New Mexico. **Students at Madison** are 35% white, 48% Hispanic, 4% African American, 5% Native American, and 5% Asian American. 53% are male and 47% are female. 31% receive special education services (including gifted and autism spectrum programs). 9% are English Language Learners. 48% qualify for free and reduced lunch. 32% are proficient in reading and 24% are proficient in math, according to 2017 PARCC data.

The theme for the year was "art and artists as agents of social change." The repertoire selections (one piece each for the first, second, and fourth nine weeks) were *New Wade 'n Water* by African American composer Adolphus Hailstork, *Happy Xmas (War Is Over)* by John Lennon, arranged by Tom Wallace, and *Imagine* also by John Lennon, arranged by Richard Saucedo. Students engaged in listening activities, completed graphic organizers, received lectures and presentations providing background information on the repertoire including biographical information

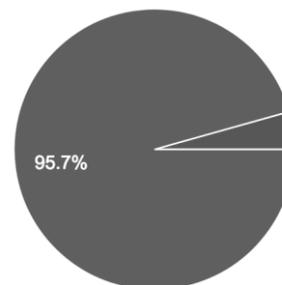
about the composers, held class discussions, did personal reflective writing and group/partner writing, crafted discussion questions, and completed a final project menu with options designed to appeal to students' different academic strengths and interests—all with a writing component.

Findings

The survey sent to music teachers found that local conditions do reflect what is described in the research about impacts of standardized testing, particularly the requirement that math and literacy be taught in all contents. 46 teachers responded to the survey. The largest number were band specialists, but responses were received from all levels and disciplines. The survey found that 95.7% of respondents have spent professional development time reviewing standardized testing data during professional development, 95.7% have experienced disruptions to their schedule and instruction due to the administration of standardized tests, 71.7% have been asked to provide math/literacy instruction during advisory or advocacy time, 67.4% have been asked to provide math/literacy instruction during their regular instructional time, and 82.6% have been asked or required to participate in a school-wide writing initiative during regular instructional time. Conversely, only 23.9% reported being asked if other contents could support them in any way.



Teachers who have been asked to provide literacy/math instruction during regular instructional time. (67.4% Yes.)



Teachers who report that their instruction has been disrupted by the administration of standardized tests. (95.7% Yes.)

Teachers' comments were revealing of the frustration that these disruptions cause. Many felt disrespected by the infringement on their content time; others wondered why they should be teaching math and literacy when they have their own set of standards—written at the national level and adopted by the state of New Mexico—that they are responsible for covering. Still others felt that they were not qualified to provide math or literacy instruction since their teaching certifications are in performing arts. One teacher noted that the fine arts are different in their nature from other contents taught in the schools, and that that difference attracts students to our music classes. We should be allowed to honor that difference by staying true to the content that the students signed up to learn.

In the second part of the study, the Madison band students were accepting of the writing assignments and discussions. Some were even enthusiastic about the opportunity to learn more about the music they were performing. The students' writing samples showed that they were engaged with the topics being covered. The writing assignments took the place of another activity normally used as a bell-ringer in the rehearsal (a listening log), but students simply adapted to the change and before the end of the first nine weeks were accustomed to getting out writing materials one day a week at the beginning of class.

Student concert reflections revealed that they still felt that they had performed their repertoire at a high level. A few students commented that they felt their performance was enhanced by the connection to context they had gained through the class discussions.

Next Steps

During the three concert units with integrated writing, only a participation grade was given to the discussions and writing assignments. In the future, a rubric will be designed or adopted to track students' improvements in their writing skills throughout the year. This element may help gain administrative approval to replace school-wide writing in the music class with something more organically related to the performance-based curriculum.

Recommendations

For teachers: According to the survey, 54.3% of APS secondary music teachers who responded rated themselves at least somewhat likely to incorporate writing into their rehearsals if not required to do so. A repertoire-based approach can make this both less daunting and more enriching than teachers might assume. Advocating for the ability to adapt requirements for literacy support to our own classrooms will allow music teachers to both maintain the musical integrity of our ensemble classes and participate in school-wide priorities like writing practice.

For administrators: To honor music teachers' expertise in their art form, accept that writing practice might look different in a large ensemble rehearsal than it does in other content areas. Allowing teachers the freedom to fit literacy supports into their curriculum in organic ways respects the contributions that music programs make to our school communities and to students' lives through their performance-based curricula and encourages the deepening of that experience for students through connected writing activities rather than time-consuming, unrelated additions to the already enormous amount of skills and understandings that music teachers foster in their students every day.

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