

Dear Independence School Board and Administrators,

At last Monday evening's board meeting, it was mentioned that music could possibly be considered for a job cut. Specifically, it has been suggested to reduce music to one class per six-day cycle in grades K-5. This letter is to address the music staff's concerns with this proposal.

The Elementary Music Program

Currently, we see students twice in a six-day cycle, for a total of approximately **50 minutes** per week in K-2 and **67 minutes** per week in 3-5. The national guidelines for elementary music set forth in the "Opportunity-to-Learn Standards" by the Music Educators National Conference state that elementary music should be a **minimum of 90 minutes** per week. As you can see, we are already at less than two-thirds of this goal. With the proposed reduction, music would fall to **25-33 minutes** per week, or about one third of the national guideline.

For children in the 21st century, the elementary music class represents **the only place where all of our students are actively making music**. 100 years ago, everyone sang with their families, at home, and in church. Since then, the advent of radio, television, and recorded music has transformed music from an active part of everyday life to a professional activity reserved for the "talented". In our elementary music classes, every child can and does make music, instrumental, vocal, solo, small group, and large group. They come to understand music-making once again as an integral part of being human, as opposed to a form of passive entertainment.

Music education is a **core academic subject** in the **No Child Left Behind** act of 2002. And according to the **Iowa Core Curriculum**, the five Core areas (Literacy, Math, Science, Social Studies, and 21st Century Skills) should be taught across the curriculum. The music class is one of the few examples where this is already taking place. These state and federal mandates are based on numerous research studies which show that elementary music education builds spatial awareness and the ability to think ahead, which translates to **better success in other school subjects and higher test scores**.

The following skills are taught in the music classroom on a regular basis:

1. **Music performance:** Singing on pitch, playing drums, keyboards, xylophones, recorders, and unpitched percussion.
2. **Music notation:** Students learn to read and write music symbols for rhythm, melody, and harmony. This functions the same as learning to read and write a foreign language in brain development.
3. **English and foreign language fluency:** Every song has text which is spoken and sung together while reading. In addition, texts are pulled apart and analyzed for their rhythmic components, then mixed together *by the students* into new speech patterns and rhythms to be performed. In the lower elementary grades, students practice left-to-right tracking and mirroring skills, which are essential pre-reading skills.
4. **American and world folk songs and historical music:** The traditions and cultures of our society are passed down in the music classroom in a way that does not exist elsewhere. Children still sing and play games on the playground, but they have lost much of the repertoire that was once common among kids in this country. In addition, exposing students to world cultures and music gives them a global understanding of the world which will be vital to their professional lives in the ever-expanding global marketplace.
5. **Dance:** Students learn and perform traditional folk dances (American and world), as well as learn creative movement. Again, 100 years ago this was part of the culture (square-dances, etc.), but has been lost to passive entertainment.
6. **Drama:** Students recreate stories through movement, speech, and music. They take on roles, use props and costumes, and perform for the public at concerts.
7. **Collaboration & Creativity:** Nearly every music period involves individual, partner, and small group work on a creative music task such as improvising, composing, arranging, or notating. Students must work within self-selected and teacher-chosen groups, and are always asked to reflect on the quality of work from their groups. Students must solve rhythmic puzzles to create and perform patterns.

8. **Leadership:** Solo singing (done by all students) and playing instill self-confidence and self-awareness. Group work demands that students take on a leadership role to achieve results.
9. **Science & Math:** Acoustics (the science of sound) is explored through the function of sound waves to create pitches and timbres on different instruments. Meter is the musical measurement and grouping of time units, and rhythm is the addition, division, and counting of beats of time.

There is a window of opportunity for learning basic musical skills. Just like language development, musical skill becomes exponentially harder to acquire as children get older. And during a six-day cycle, there will often be a 9 day gap (including weekends) between music classes. **This does not allow for retention of skills and knowledge.** Unlike art class, where students can physically pick up where they left off on a project, music projects involve much more memory to perform, and **regular practice is essential to improving musical skills.**

What Else is Lost?

If we reduce elementary music, **we cut off the foundation of the band and choir programs** in middle and high school. Students currently come to band and choir with a solid foundation in music literacy, rhythmic accuracy, and pitch matching, as well as an ability to perform various parts in an ensemble. These skills get harder to teach with age, so not only would the choir and band programs be doing remedial work, the students would struggle to catch up. In addition, participation in these programs will be reduced, as more students grow up without the musical self-confidence to participate.

In the choral music program, **this would also mean the elimination of a .5 choir director.** That would put us down to **1 choir director 6-12** (5th grade choir would likely cease to exist). The music program is **already understaffed** because some years back there was a Middle School vocal position that was eliminated, and one teacher now shares all of West and most of Middle School.

Not only would fifth grade choir be eliminated, but **middle school vocal lessons would likely be eliminated as well.** Currently, we are unable to offer lessons to 5-6 grade due to sharing staff, and only offer large sectional lessons to 7-8 choir students, and individual lessons to *some*, but not all 9-12 choir students. With only one choir director to run four rehearsals at two buildings, teaching lessons as well at both buildings would be impossible. This would also mean we would have to stop preparing students and sending them to the **OPUS and NEICDA Honor Choirs**, the only enrichment for talented singers available at the middle school. We would also have to stop preparing **solos and ensembles** for our spring concert at middle school. Finally, reducing a vocal/general music teacher means more classes of 50-100+ students with only one teacher in front of the group.

Thank you for your continuing efforts to find the best solutions for our students. **We are currently working on a chart to compare our music program with others in the area**, and will send you that information as soon as possible. If you have any questions concerning the general and vocal music programs, please feel free to contact us at any time.

Sincerely,

Tim Purdum
Pat Thomas
Roger Barloon
David Lang
Lisa Lang
Diane Yeager