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DISMANTLING STUDENT COMPETITION

Some hard facts about competition raise doubts about its use for teachers in many subject areas. For art to be art, it must be a reflection of our human condition, for it is ultimately a subjective sharing of emotion, usually emotion affected by, or in response to, the conditions in which artist and subject find themselves. Paradoxically, art very often becomes a casualty to the very social conditions it tries to reflect, as in our obsession for competing that has permeated all venues of our society, including our artistic environment.

How do we find alternative ways of teaching our children both as musicians and as citizens of the future? Many people have started to recognize the importance of alternative, noncompetitive teaching methods and are beginning to make a difference.

Closest to home for music educators is the innovative extracurricular policy of Plainfield (Indiana) Community Middle School, where any child may participate in any and all extracurricular activities so desired. Although critics might conjure up athletic teams and musical groups in laughable chaos, the principal, Jerry Goldsberry, testifies that quality is being maintained. The best football players still play the greatest amount of time, although everyone who has worked hard gets in for a few plays. The band has developed a mentor program, where the best students help teach the newcomers.

In the process, the school has done away with superimposed social castes around such activities as cheerleading, which often produces a social caste elite based on unimportant skills. Emphasis is on teamwork, cooperation, and connecting with the group, because, says Goldsberry, "These are 11-,

12-, and 13-year-olds undergoing massive physical and emotional changes, creating anxiety and stress." Adolescents not making the cut in one activity often are too defeated to try another. Plainfield emphasizes maximum participation to have students feel connected to the school, rather than concentrating on an outstanding few.

This is a real-world solution to our obsession for finding out who is best and ostracizing the worst. How do we apply such principles to secondary and college music? First, we can take a hard look at what we do in everyday routines and teaching.

In high school music ensembles, is it really necessary to have everyone audition to be first chair, second chair, etc.? Does it really matter that the best clarinet player sit in the first chair rather than the third when both are playing the same music? Is it essential that the three tenor saxophonists, playing the same part, be certified as best, middle, and worst? Why not move students around so they can experience playing all different parts on their instruments? It takes a courageous band director to do this, but the average and less-gifted players might feel a greater sense of belonging to the group and might rise to the occasion.

Choral directors, usually a bit more egalitarian, could improve as well. Using section leaders and auditioning a small, elite madrigal or show choir ensemble often places the prettiest and brightest in the upper echelon. True, this identifies students with the best voices to make up the best ensembles. But the emphasis of a musical organization should be on the students and the experience they carry away from the organization, not on training an elite group to enhance the reputation of a director or school.

Elitism Isn't Smart

If only a few chosen ones experience any select aspect of the program, it is elitism and isn't very smart. The influence of puberty on the adolescent voice isn't overcome until the late teens. The young wavering bass with little breath in high school just might be the rich, strong baritone in college with a professional future, if he isn't too discouraged from high school.

Music contests in secondary education have long been controversial. They did help music gain wide acceptance in public school curriculum. Many directors feel, however, that the 10 to 20 minutes a judge has with an organization is hardly ample to make a competent commentary on the instructional and musical caliber of a specific program, although the merit of the program is reflected in the scores received.

Even though the idea is to compete against a "standard," that standard remains undefined, and in its place is usually found a strategy whereby a certain number of ensembles--no matter how good or bad--receive I's (enough to spread good feelings without making it look too easy), and anyone who gets less than a III has no business being there. These ratings create a tangible pecking order that separates the best from the rest. More to the point, directors from these schools can expect the results to be reflected in job security.

All contests, competitive or not, should be done without rating systems. Few directors, let alone

students, get past the number they receive and objectively analyze the comments. The reaction a director has to a critical comment about phrasing is different when accompanied by a I than a III.

Critics argue that we have so watered down many situations that we lack standards, or that we have lost our zeal for excellence and settle for less than our best. The paradox is that excellence seems to have diminished as we increased competitive situations in our educational system. Competition is inevitable, but it should be used only when necessary and not as a means unto itself.

One's view of the competition may depend on whether one looks at music as an educational discipline crucial to the core curriculum or as an activity area open only to the best and brightest. If an educational issue, the object should be to find ways to develop music appreciation and music-making skills in as many students as possible. If the goal is merely to identify and reward a select few, that is easily accomplished, no matter how poor the training. While our colleagues in physical education are revising course content and teaching methods because of compelling research, music educators seem to cling to out-of-date beliefs in the mythical powers of competing to enhance performance.

Competition tends to promote conformity. The same rules apply to everyone, and the game must be played the same way each time. Creativity and Individualism are the opposite of competition because the nature of creativity is to originate something new that defies standardization. To be creative is to be uniquely individualistic, idiosyncratic, and daring.

Basics Abandoned

Skill levels of students in junior and senior high school music programs are not so advanced that the levels of competition to which they are subjected are always justified. In attempting to meet those competition levels, many basics are ignored or left behind.

In the rating system we use at contests, for example, a shortage is deliberately and artificially manufactured. If only "the best" can attain the highest rating, everyone is competing against each other for those few choice scores instead of dealing individually with each student's technique, phrasing, intonation, and interpretation.

I would suggest that assigning grades to student work in subjective/aesthetic areas such as art and music be abolished. Yet, I fear that dismantling such a cornerstone of educational culture would be too traumatic. Grades are too embedded in our psyche and our views of learning and motivation to let loose.

As John Holt wrote, "We destroy the . . . love of learning in children, which is so strong when they are small, by encouraging and compelling them to work for petty and contemptible rewards-gold stars, or papers marked 100 and tacked to the wall, or A's . . . for the ignoble satisfaction of feeling they are better than someone else."

In addition, the standard for an A at one high school may not be an A at another program, and it may not be for the same subject material. At a time when even the results of national standardized tests

are being questioned, we continue to take grades from two or more different schools at face value.

If we concede for the moment that grades are necessary for documentation, I propose that applied music in the college curriculum be pass-fail. Grades should be an objective representation of class participation and testing results over the same exact material. It is exceptionally difficult, if not impossible, to create such an objective evaluation system for applied instruction without destroying the very elements that make it the unique form of instruction it is. What is lost in motivating a student by the threat of a lower grade is more than gained in freedom to let the student pursue individual technical and musical needs.

Grading is not the only aspect of applied music touched by competition. Taken from a historical perspective, the idea of a student fully committing himself or herself to one teacher appears logical because of the European tradition of apprenticeship from which it springs. To outsiders, however, it is a curious system in which students must abide by an unwritten law allowing them to seek help and advice only from their assigned teacher. Some music programs, on the other hand, have begun to implement procedures of cooperation rather than competition with very positive results.

We jeopardize the opportunity for rich, fulfilling relationships with our colleagues in many ways. Peer evaluation systems in higher education too often reflect the same ones we use in music contests and are Dust as wayward in their outcome. By making it possible to get the optimum raise in salary only by beating out one's colleagues for a rating, we set up a competitive, malevolent scenario pitting each professor against the other.

One of the oldest and truest maxims of competition comes into play here-to win does not mean that you must be better than your competition, only that they be worse than you. It is now impossible to freely express support and admiration for a colleague's work, lest your own seem wanting in the balance.

Rather than evaluating faculty individually, why not evaluate the entire departmental faculty as a total entity in coordination with strategic planning initiatives? Granted, this would not permit individual faculty ranking within the department, but it would allow for the real reason for evaluation-departmental (and ultimately institutional) status and reputation.

This would be beneficial for several reasons. First, it would alleviate the need for unnecessary or trivial scholarship just for the sake of amassing credentials for evaluation, contributing nothing but evidence of the researcher's ability to conduct scholarly exercises.

Second would be motivation for faculty to engage in cooperative scholarly productivity. With emphasis on department rather than individual status, faculty members would be freer to work together to produce scholarly work they all agree is significant. Departmental evaluation would also allow individual faculty members to concentrate on larger works, such as a book or major composition, because pressure to produce every year would not be as great.

Finally, this process would allow evaluation of specific faculty (such as tenure-track faculty) to be

descriptive rather than mathematical. Evaluation ratings don't count toward tenure in most colleges anyway, because, legally, ranking systems have not held up in court. Much of this smacks of academic anarchy, and many will reject this suggestion out of hand. But remember that many faculty complaints about teaching in college center around their dysfunctional relationship with colleagues and the punitive nature of evaluation.

It will be a major task to attempt to dismantle ingrained traditions of competition, but we need to begin somewhere. To staR, we must diligently observe our day-to-day activities, both with students and colleagues. This involves the affirmation of each other. We must ask ourselves if there is any situation in which such affirmation is harmful to short- or long-term goals. Only when we discover it is not can we rededicate ourselves to its pursuit, for that affirmation is one of the primary reasons we teach.

PHOTO: Mom and Dad's dream car trip

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