

# A Story of Advocacy: The Snoqualmie Valley School District Music Coalition

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Once upon a time in a choir room not so far away (in North Bend, WA, as a matter of fact!) there was a music teacher who had a conversation with his piano accompanist about advocacy. What was it? How could they most effectively advocate for their music program? How could they practically implement positive change to not just their program, but the whole school district? How could they move beyond their local boosters group (who was knees deep in planning the next fundraiser) to a district wide unified effort to support music education? This conversation, as it turns out, was exactly how the Snoqualmie Valley School District (SVSD) Music Coalition started! No committees, no meetings, not even a coffee appointment at Starbucks, just a decision between a teacher and a parent to start a district wide, K-12, music advocacy effort.

For the practical “How To” information on the Music Coalition model we looked to Dr. John Benham’s, Music Advocacy: Moving From Survival to Vision. Carol (the accompanist) had learned about the book at the 2011 WMEA NW Conference advocacy session in Bellevue. Combining Dr. Benham’s instructions with our unique situation, we outlined the process to start the coalition: develop a mission statement, agree on the coalition’s strategic operating principles, and set up communication tools (in our case, a website and a Facebook page).

## Getting Started: Be Strategic!

The first step in the process was to get all the music teachers on board with the coalition and develop a mission statement. We used one of our district directed “collaboration” days to discuss the focus, goals, and strategic operating principles of the group. Carol skillfully (and bravely!) facilitated the meeting. The teachers played a vital role in developing the mission statement, “To ensure equal access to music education for all students K-12 in the Snoqualmie Valley School District”. The strategic operating principles we chose to use are clearly outlined in Dr. Benham’s book as “The Eight Strategic Errors to Avoid” (we only have seven). It is vitally important that anyone involved in an advocacy effort operate on the same set of agreed principles to ensure a consistent and unified message. The principles for the SVSD Music Coalition are:

- Think Long Term, District Wide, K-12, all music programs included Do not limit the coalition to a single local school, a single curricular component, or a single year. Stay focused on all students, K-12, in all music organizations, over several years. It takes time to establish positive relationships and good communication with decision makers.
- Goal: To Educate and Inform Educate decision makers, coalition members, and community members and music vendors about the impacts of music program policy issues, budget decisions, and the value of music education. Our goal is NOT to raise money! (Leave that to the boosters and PTSA).
- Parents Take The Lead Do not limit advocacy activities to music teachers or control by music teachers. Teachers must actively support the efforts by providing appropriate data, educating their parents, and communicating with their administration. Parents are the ones who are the face and voice of the coalition. This also avoids the perception that the teachers are advocating for their own jobs (the job of the local teacher’s union).
- Be Proactive By establishing the coalition when things are going well, it allows the positive relationship building to begin immediately instead of taking a defensive posture. The

coalition may focus on the marketing and promotion of their programs instead of asking for resources or defending programs from cuts.

- Communicate with Impact Statements focused on Music Students Be able to articulate the potential impacts to students as cuts or changes are suggested with concise and accurate data. Do not suggest alternate cuts or compromises – even when asked!
- Refer to Music as a Core Curricular Component Avoid any comparison between music and extra-curricular components such as athletics. Focus on music as a curricular and co-curricular subject and on the *intrinsic value* of music within the school curriculum.
- Be Data Driven Gather appropriate, effective, and accurate data. Communicate using the appropriate district process in a positive way. Stay focused on the issues at hand; do not resort to personal attacks. Always cultivate positive relationships with the way you communicate.

Setting up communication tools for the coalition was simple. We recruited a parent with web design experience to make a website, and another parent who was a social media whiz to open a Facebook page. Not to mention, we expanded our “leadership team” to four people instead of two!

### **Now What?**

So far our efforts had gone just as planned: we developed a mission statement, agreed on our coalition’s strategic operating principles, and set up tools for communication. *Now what?* Our district was not suggesting any major cuts to the music programs financially, and there was no impending doom facing the music class schedules. In fact, participation in music classes across the district had been growing steadily for the last three or more years. Programs were overflowing, students were learning, and parents were happy! (for the most part...). What does a music advocacy coalition do when the perception is that things are going well? The answer is to present a “State of Music Annual Report” to the school board! This is the centerpiece of our yearly advocacy efforts. It is the tangible, hands on, most important thing we will do as a coalition from year to year to effectively and positively communicate with decision makers and community members.

The first step in developing our Annual Report was to decide what data to include in the report. Using Dr. Benham’s suggestions and feedback from the all the teachers we agreed on three main points to highlight in our first report:

- 1) Operating Principles of the Coalition – to communicate with decision makers our desire to be valuable resource in any decision making process for gathering and analyzing data about the music programs.
- 2) A Brief 3-year Enrollment History – Including district wide enrollment graphs at each level: general music, 5<sup>th</sup> grade band, middle school band and choir, and high school band and choir.
- 3) All performances K-12 – Highlighting achievements and awards of performing groups of all programs, festival awards...etc.

### **To the School Board!**

After deciding what to include on our first report, we began collecting and compiling data, as well as writing and editing the report. Data collection was mostly comprised of waiting for teachers to respond to emails with their specific data contribution. The report was considered final when all the music teachers in the district had read it and approved of the

data and how it was portrayed. The teachers were responsible for making sure that each of their administrators had a copy of the report before it went to the Superintendent and School Board (administrators don't like surprises unless it's their birthday).

In order to present the report to the school board for the first time we were careful to ask the district what the appropriate process was for communication of this type. Carol was asked to meet privately with both the Superintendent and Assistant Superintendent for an hour before any information was passed on to the board. This turned out to be a great opportunity to inform them about the coalition and give them a lengthy and personal presentation of the data we had collected.

Finally, after being screened by the district administration, we had the "go-ahead" to present to the school board. We emailed the Annual Report to the board in June for their review. In September we had the opportunity to give a brief statement and have the board make comments and ask questions about the report. Remembering our strategic principle that the coalition is primarily parent led, Carol stood in front of the board to answer questions and offer comments. The response was overwhelmingly positive! From one board member, "Why don't all the programs give reports like this?!", from another, "it is great to see the teachers working together in such a positive way", and from another, "What is your greatest dream, your "end-all" vision, I am ready to write the check!".

### **The Second and Third Reports**

The second State of Music Annual Report added to the data presented in the first report (enrollment information) and new data to highlight other areas of the districts music programs. The teachers decided to isolate the attrition rate from middle school to high school (8<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> grade) as a data point (a common issue in many districts). Also, because our district had just welcomed three new music teachers in one year, we decided to add short bios of each teacher to the report.

This year's report will include a continuation of the enrollment data from year one and two, and provide data relevant to major changes going on in the district and highlight music student impacts. In every report, we have tried to find creative and fun ways to recognize the achievements, awards, and successes of performing groups and individuals in the district.

### **The Moral of the Story**

Over the course of beginning and maintaining the SVSD Music Coalition we have learned some valuable lessons that may help you as you start your own coalitions.

- How you operate (following the principles) is just as important as what you do.
- Get to know your administrators, school board members, and superintendent. Adjust your communication to fit their learning style.
- Decision makers are big picture, strategic thinkers.
- There are always new groups of parents to educate about the coalition – educating and informing never ends. Work through your PTA's, booster groups, Facebook, and community music ensembles.
- Help decision makers justify the decision you and they want to make by providing the data necessary for them to support their decision.
- Keep that first annual report really simple and positive – there are no expectations at this point.

- It's not a lot of work to gather data, write the report, and review the report takes only a few weeks; this happens in the spring for us. For each individual teacher, getting the data isn't that time consuming.
- Always thank people for their time!

Resources:

John Benham, Music Advocacy: Moving From Survival to Vision, 2010, Rowman and Littlefield Publications  
SVSDMusicCoalition.org  
SVSD Music Coalition on Facebook