

# An Agenda for Excellence in Music at the Middle Level

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*A Statement by MENC on  
Middle-Level Music Education*

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# INTRODUCTION

The middle school concept has been a part of the educational scene for a number of years. It is the controlling concept for a large number of those American schools that serve students in their early adolescent years—years during which students are in transition from childhood to adulthood; from elementary school to high school.

In taking on the challenge of providing early adolescent students with an education appropriate to their needs, educators who subscribe to the middle school concept have developed a multitude of instructional techniques. Grouping students in “families” or “teams” provides for some of their social needs. Giving students the opportunity to sample a variety of subjects in short “exploratory” classes fits in with their lively but unsettled intellectual processes. Organizing instruction to encourage cross-disciplinary integration of learning allows students to connect what they have learned from subject to subject and to their lives outside the classroom. Most of all, dividing the school day according to a variety of inventive scheduling systems gives students and teachers the flexibility to achieve efficiency in learning.

One of the most important and influential works to define the role of the middle school is the National Association of Secondary School Principals publication, *An Agenda for Excellence at the Middle Level*. In the “Curriculum” section of that book, it states that the middle school should “provide students with opportunities to develop skills in and respect for artistic expression and aesthetic sensitivity through participation in artistic activities and through exposure to the artistic products of others.”

Under "Culture and Climate," the same document states that the school must "provide opportunities for students to achieve and demonstrate excellence in a number of domains (i.e., the arts, athletics, academics, crafts). Make certain that every student in the school has a reasonable opportunity to excel at something."

In its exploration of "Student Development," the book includes the statement that the school must "give students opportunities to behave responsibly and demonstrate their growing capacity for self-control and self-management in a secure setting. Activities that are planned and monitored by students and clearly focused on the learning goals of the school help students accept responsibility, understand consequences, and learn to cooperate." Furthermore, it says that schools must "provide activities that allow students to explore their aptitudes, interests, and special talents, and to develop an accurate and positive self-concept."

For years, especially those years since the publishing of *An Agenda for Excellence at the Middle Level*, educators have worked hard to meet these goals, but their success has been limited—in part because many middle schools have lost track of music and the other arts. Some of the practices adopted to implement the middle school concept have actually hindered the implementation of music courses, and as a result, many middle schools are unable to provide a comprehensive music program that meets the needs of all students. In particular, adoption of some of the scheduling practices associated with the middle school philosophy has cut students off from experiences in music and the other arts.

The goals of the middle school concept, as well as the goals set out in the *National Standards for Arts Education*, make it imperative that all educators work together to provide comprehensive, sequential music instruction for every child in every middle school.

# MEETING MIDDLE SCHOOL GOALS THROUGH MUSIC

Middle schools serve as the bridge between the elementary school experience—where children first learn to read, to compute, to think, and to learn—and the high school experience—where more emphasis is placed on learning discrete subject matter and specialized skills. It is in the middle school that young adolescents discover much about themselves and also discover much about the world in which they live. Middle school students must also continue to acquire concepts, knowledge, and skills in several subject areas that are first taught in the elementary school and that continue to be taught through the students' high school experience.

Much of that which is stated in *An Agenda for Excellence at the Middle Level* as “the elements of schooling that must receive the highest priority” can be accomplished in the music classroom.

**S**chools must focus the core values on respect for diversity, commitment to the primacy of learning, and intellectual activity, individual responsibility for personal behavior and the welfare of the school community, and other values appropriate to the local setting.—*An Agenda for Excellence at the Middle Level*, page 2

Music courses focus on values appropriate to the mission of the middle school. Commitment to learning and the acceptance of individual responsibility are both central to the preparation of group performances. Here, every participating student must work toward high standards set by the group—and by the music itself. Students who participate in reaching these standards lay a foundation of self-esteem from which they can go on to success after success. Music study provides an opportunity for students to achieve success and develop a positive feeling about themselves and about school. It provides an opportunity to learn

the language of music—an essential form of communication found in every culture. Interest in music can be fostered in all children, from those who exhibit high levels of musical ability to those with less obvious gifts. Successful, active learning experiences in music can motivate students to achieve in other avenues of learning.

Music study imparts important individual and group values:

- Students gain a new commitment to intellectual activity when they experience the inspiration gained from having interpreted a work of art.
- Students develop close ties to the school community from their musical activities by bringing together their families and friends in a worthwhile, wholesome activity.
- Students value the respect they gain from the community when they share their talents—and they learn the importance of individual responsibility by making sure that they share their best efforts.

- As a group activity, the production of music brings everyone close together. Through an education in music, students grow to realize and value the roles each individual has in this process, and they gain an appreciation and respect for the diverse contributions in this shared task.

## Allowing Achievement

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First among the benefits of a music curriculum is the purely musical or aesthetic experience afforded by music study:

- Music offers opportunities for self-expression and self-actualization, especially to those students who have learning styles that are oriented toward the arts. Musical intelligence has been identified as a separate and essential component of human intelligence by Harvard psychologist Howard Gardner; it needs to be developed as such.
- Students, who are the creators and participants in our culture, have their aesthetic taste and abilities for lifelong enjoyment of music shaped in the middle school.
- Students who plan to pursue careers in music find that this period in their preprofessional lives can be crucial.

Along with the development of musical knowledge and skills, the team effort of ensemble classes offers another avenue for achievement. This type of music study is conducive to the development of social skills and of the ability to work cooperatively with peers toward common goals. These are

**S**chools must ... provide opportunities for students to achieve and demonstrate excellence in a number of domains (i.e., the arts, athletics, academics, crafts). Make certain that every student in the school has a reasonable opportunity to excel at something.—*An Agenda for Excellence at the Middle Level*, page 3

goals that, when reached, become the hallmarks of shared success. Music classes often provide students with a place within the school where they belong, a place that leads them to identify positively with the school and their peers.

In addition, students who take part in music classes learn essential lessons about the pursuit of excellence. The process of rehearsal, for example, involves the continual and thoughtful refinement of execution of a piece of music. Students who have experienced the pursuit of musical excellence are only a small step away from applying that experience to the search for excellence in other areas in school and in life.

**T**he middle level school's curriculum should equip students with skills for continued learning, including those associated with the collection of information (reading, listening, research); the organization, manipulation, and expression of ideas (mathematics, writing, speaking); the evaluation of information and ideas, including their competent analysis and critique; and the production of new plans and proposals for action.—*An Agenda for Excellence at the Middle Level*, page 5

### **Promoting Continued Learning**

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All activities in music and the other arts require a high level of abstract thinking as students work to transform feelings and ideas beyond words into artistic form. Music study encourages a high degree of abstract thinking.

Both reading music notation and interpreting the sounds heard in music are abstract activities. Music study routinely brings students to ask questions about meaning. Do the sounds of a composition tell a story? Do they describe an event, paint a picture, or transmit meanings that can't be put into another form? How do changes in tempo and dynamics affect the listener?

Music study also brings students to a heightened level of reflective thinking and problem solving:

- Students at the middle level must learn to analyze problems, reflect on their own work, and strive for excellence. Music classes, which involve the shared task of working toward a viable interpretation of an existing work or intensive individual efforts to refine a composition or arrangement, encourage students to be thoughtful and analytical.
- Students who take part in music performance embrace a variety of learning modalities, all at the same time. They are engaged cognitively, interpersonally, intuitively, kinesthetically, spatially, and at deep levels of feeling. This kind of multimodal and multilevel learning challenges students to develop more of their potential, especially in their ability to deal with the artistic facts of ambiguity and multiple outcomes. Music learning, that is, involves students in acquiring skills essential to creative problem solving.



# MUSICAL GOALS IN THE MIDDLE SCHOOL CURRICULUM

The middle level school's curriculum should provide students with opportunities to develop skills in and respect for artistic expression and aesthetic sensitivity through participation in artistic activities and through exposure to the artistic products of others.—*An Agenda for Excellence at the Middle Level*, page 6

Students in middle school music courses are engaged in part of an instructional continuum that begins in kindergarten. It is a continuum on which skills, concepts, and attitudes are built developmentally, grade by grade, until the students attain and can demonstrate a remarkably sophisticated level of musical understanding and ability.

Those students who were provided a comprehensive elementary school music program had the benefits of:

- a general music program for all students. This sequential curriculum involved students in a variety of musical experiences to develop skills in singing, music reading, listening, creating, and valuing music—and it did so at every grade level in a way appropriate to the corresponding developmental levels of the students.
- an opportunity for all students to sing in a chorus.
- an opportunity for all students to receive instruction on a musical instrument and to participate in an instrumental ensemble (band, orchestra, or small ensembles).

The comprehensive study of music should continue through grade 8, giving all students the opportunity to become educated for a lifetime of musical fulfillment. A sequential program also prepares students with musical interest and ability to continue in a high school program to further develop their abilities in music performance and composition as well as their understanding of historical contexts and the ways pieces are constructed.

If the middle school experience is to allow students to develop this interest and ability, the music program must create a climate of positive feeling toward music that will encourage students to continue the study, creation, or performance of music during their high school years. The elective classes in performance at the middle level must continue the development of students' individual and groups skills to allow them to contribute to the arts-based goals of the high school program. High-quality music must be available as a part of each student's adolescent experience. Every effort, that is, should be made to give students a structure within which they can achieve a high level of musical literacy during the middle school years.

For many students, however, the middle school experience marks the end of this developmental continuum. This fact is a reality reflected in the National Standards for Music Education, which state that students are expected to take courses in one of the arts—not necessarily music—after grade 8. Some will elect music study in high school, college, or independently as adults, but for the majority, the musical background that will serve them in their continuing education and in life must be attained by the end of middle school.

These goals cannot be met with a curriculum that is limited to exploratory experiences. The content of the music curriculum is a continuous strand that provides a sequential and assessable curriculum and takes into account students' elementary-level learning as well as various exploratory curricula that appeal to the unique learning style of the adoles-

cent. In such a sequential program, assessment of knowledge and skills can be carried out in much the same manner as that used for other academic subjects.

# SCHEDULING MUSIC IN THE MIDDLE SCHOOL

Music study offers great potential to students and to the school community when everyone concerned understands how music fits the middle school concept and the continuing development of each student. This understanding, however, must result in action on the part of the school community. This action takes form in hiring appropriate personnel and in providing funding, equipment, and facilities. Most of all, this action must touch the educational lives of students with the provision of a single commodity: *time*.

## Time Constraints

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Most middle school schedules include a block of time for the traditional “core” subjects each day. In the remaining time, often two periods called “related arts” or “unified arts,” all other elective subjects are scheduled—physical education, health, home economics, industrial arts, and sometimes foreign languages, computers, remedial classes and gifted programs, as well as sex education and drug and alcohol education.

Every music course meets at least every other day in periods of at least 45 minutes.... In schools not utilizing block scheduling, the school day includes no fewer than eight instructional periods. Every effort is made to avoid scheduling single-section courses in music against single-section courses in required subjects.—  
*Opportunity-to-Learn Standards for Music Instruction, pages 9–10*

Music is an academic subject. With the passage of the Goals 2000: Educate America Act, its importance in the curriculum is written into law. It is a subject for which content and achievement standards have been proposed, reviewed, and accepted by the National Committee for Standards in the Arts. In practice, however, the scheduling of music classes often involves including them in the related-arts mix. Grouped in the schedule with so many other subjects, however worthy, music is left with an amount of time that is simply not adequate. Even worse, as more offerings are added to the curriculum of the middle school, the school day is seldom extended.

The time constraints that arise from these challenges to scheduling pose severe problems for maintaining and providing a sequential, comprehensive music program. In addition, a way must be found around this scheduling limitation if educators are not to rule out the practical application of a fundamental tenet of the middle school philosophy—that of offering students a balanced education in which music, the other arts, and other academic subjects are connected. The interdisciplinary connections between music and subjects such as mathematics, science, technology, history, social studies, and language arts are there, but the schedule must be designed to allow teachers and students to make the curricular links from the basis of a firm foundation in every subject.

### **An Interdisciplinary Example: Technology**

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One example of a well-planned, sequential music program that supports the middle school concept is the use of technology in music composition. Fulfilling technology/computer requirements in a way that appeals to the students, such a course delivers essential music content, develops creative thinking, and teaches the process of reflection. Students who face the exciting and exacting task of composing music at an electronic music workstation are soon drawn into posing and solving problems as they evaluate—and come to value—their creative efforts.

Students also can use computer programs to hone their individual skills in music fundamentals, ear training, and notation; they can use other programs in ways that are directly analogous to the application of the word processor in language arts (an analogy that can be exploited for the educational benefit of the students). Along the way, they can engage the subject matter of acoustics and its basis in mathematics and can use recording devices to reinforce further this knowledge even as they record, listen to, and evaluate their own and other students' work.

### **Continuing General Music**

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Music courses in the middle school typically offer both performance ensembles and general music classes. General music classes include such musical essentials as singing, music reading, rhythmic activities, instrumental activities, listening, creating, and valuing music. The ensembles, however, offer students the special musical opportunity to develop artistic performances of choral, band, or orchestral music.

Typically, middle schools offer either one or the other: Either students elect to participate in a performing group or they are placed in a general music class. This practice, unfortunately, results in two problems:

- The student in the performing group is denied the instruction available in the general music class, which continues the broad-based music experiences begun at the elementary level.
- The students who make up the bulk of those attending the general music class are those who did *not* elect a performance class; typically,

The general music curriculum comprises a balanced and sequential program of singing, playing instruments, reading music, listening to music, and improvising and composing music.... General music is required of all students through grade 8.—  
*Opportunity-to-Learn Standards for Music Instruction*, page 9

these are the less musically motivated students.

Unfortunately, many decision makers for the middle level fail to grasp the nature of the general music class. Most people in the school community understand the role of the performing ensemble: it is active, cooperative learning, which is appropriate for the adolescent. It also makes important contributions to the community's image.

The performing group is, however, only one aspect of a well-rounded music education. General music, unlike general math or general science, is the heart of the music program. Building on an effective elementary instructional program in music, adolescents are ready to learn about the world of music—opera, ballet, masterworks of orchestral literature, music of cultures throughout the world, composition, lives of composers, musical theatre, jazz, electronic music, computerized composition, multimedia techniques, and instruments such as guitars, synthesizers, and keyboards. Students are developmentally ready to relate music to other disciplines and to their burgeoning life experiences.

The general music class can provide these experiences. If the highly motivated students engaged in ensemble experiences are excused from general music, however, the remaining general music students are left to learn without the positive reinforcement that band, orchestra, or chorus friends provide.

Even under these circumstances, the general music class is quite effective. In part, this may be because general music students are often deeply involved in creating, performing, and responding to their own music. Personal stereos and basement rock and rap bands are very much a part of their lives. These musical experiences must, however, be rounded out by a music education that provides the keys to all the music of the American experience—classical as well as popular, and of the Western world as well as other cultures. It is the responsibility of the middle school to provide this instruction to all students, and the general music class can meet this

responsibility for both the violinist in the school orchestra and the guitarist in the after-school band.

## **Providing Performance Ensembles**

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The Music Educators National Conference recommends that every music course meet at least every other day in periods of at least 45 minutes. Taking this as a baseline, there are some other important specifications that should be met to support a viable performance program:

- All ensembles must be scheduled so that the entire ensemble meets together.
- Large instrumental ensembles (band and orchestra) should be scheduled so that more than one grade level can participate in each ensemble. Rather than dividing students by grade level, the schedule for these ensembles should provide for different levels of achievement (beginning, intermediate, advanced).
- The schedule should allow for the offering of small-group instruction for like instruments in addition to the large, mixed ensemble.
- The schedule should be arranged so that students can elect to take more than one ensemble (such as both band and chorus).
- Choral groups should be reasonable in size and

**C**horal and instrumental ensembles and classes are offered during the school day and are scheduled so that all members of each ensemble meet as a unit throughout the year or have equivalent time under an alternative scheduling arrangement. When enrollment justifies, the school offers at least two bands, two orchestras, and two choruses, differentiated by the experience or age level of their members, or, in the case of choruses, by their composition (e.g., treble voices, lower voices, mixed voices). Other choral and instrumental ensembles or classes are offered that reflect the musical interests of the community when clearly identifiable.—*Opportunity-to-Learn Standards for Music Instruction*, page 10



planned for effective instruction. No ensemble should serve to fill the schedules of students unable or unwilling to be scheduled elsewhere.

- Choral scheduling should take the adolescent voice into consideration. Flexible scheduling, providing for separate rehearsals of boys and girls as well as mixed rehearsals, is often effective.

In practice, meeting these recommendations can present some challenges that are unique to the mixture of the music curriculum and the middle school concept. The large class size necessary for ensembles often creates problems when it comes to scheduling other arts classes in sizes appropriate to their curricula. (In the traditional junior high approach, these courses would often just be scheduled opposite study halls.) Also, it is often difficult to schedule more than one grade level together when the arts periods for each grade are different. Because of this, a seventh *and* eighth grade band, string orchestra, or chorus is not possible in many middle schools. Full-orchestra experiences are rare; more than one grade level would need to be involved and additional time (beyond the band and string orchestra rehearsal time) would be needed to accommodate students who almost certainly would want to maintain their participation in those groups as well as in a full orchestra.

The very nature of instrumental groups provides another challenge. The balanced instrumentation begun in elementary school must be maintained and further developed in the middle school and continued into the high school. In order for students to have a valid band or orchestra experience at any level, the ensemble must have balanced instrumentation that reflects the specific standard instrumentation in the literature for that ensemble. For example, a high school band must have sufficient low brass and double reeds and not an overabundance of flutes, saxophones, and drums.

## Strategies for Scheduling

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In determining a music teacher's assignment, the considerations are much like those regarding other education professionals at the middle level: the number of classes, number of students, and amount of preparation time in the schedule should be reasonable. The teachers themselves should be individuals who enjoy working with early adolescents and have a positive approach to the adolescent's development.

One factor arises in scheduling music teachers that is rarely so pronounced an issue in other subjects: the assigned classes should be within the teacher's area of expertise. Middle school teachers need specialized training and expertise in teaching young adolescents, but music teachers also specialize in one of four areas: general music, chorus, band, and orchestra. Students, teachers, and the school community are all best served when teachers are allowed to provide instruction on the basis of strong backgrounds and proclivities.

The constraints on scheduling music in the middle school can be surmounted to the benefit of the entire school community. The activity-period approach to scheduling ensembles, which often creates conflicts, can be avoided. Music teachers need not be treated as "nonacademic" teachers whose main task is to watch students as other faculty engage in team planning.

There are a few simple tips to avoiding scheduling problems:

- Include music teachers on interdisciplinary scheduling teams.
- Permit performing groups that cut across grade levels. To do this, schedule multigrade courses (such as these ensembles) first; schedule single-grade courses second.
- Provide all students ready access to elective music ensembles. Schools

that do this by scheduling an “activity period” must take care to give priority to scheduling the ensembles. They are, after all, essential elements of the curriculum, while other “activities” may be truly extracurricular.

- Schedule general music classes along with other academic subjects; this should be simple because their class size should exactly match that of the other subjects.
- If a school has a full orchestra, schedule the band and string ensembles so that students can participate in both the full orchestra and other ensembles.

The music teacher’s time must, however, be scheduled so that the curriculum does not lose its sequential organization. This is true of the main stream of general music courses; it is an essential point in scheduling performance classes. The skills and knowledge that must be developed by students who want to reap the benefits of performance experiences simply cannot be taught in short, exploratory segments. Designing a schedule to meet the educational needs of these students may require such approaches as a rotating schedule (based on a six-day sequence), mosaic scheduling (based on ten- or fifteen-minute divisions of the day), or other approaches.

# MOVING FORWARD

The need for music in the middle school is obvious. It satisfies some of the most important needs of students at the middle level and, in doing so, serves as an effective avenue for fulfillment of the middle school concept.

The importance of music education in the middle school is emphatically supported by the National Standards for Arts Education, released in 1994 as a statement of the consensus regarding American education in music and the other arts. The MENC publication *The School Music Program: A New Vision* summarizes the implications of the standards by saying, "Every student at every level, PreK–12, should have access to a balanced, comprehensive, and sequential program of music instruction in school, taught by teachers qualified in music. General music classes should be required of all students through grade 8.... The curriculum should include a broad array of opportunities for learning diverse genres of music in diverse settings."

As noted in the national standards, "The period represented by grades 5–8 is especially critical in students' musical development." It is the task of everyone involved in the middle school—parent, teacher, and administrator—to meet this critical need by seeing that every student is provided with a complete and comprehensive education in music.