

NATIONAL BAND ASSOCIATION

THE ROLE OF INSTRUMENTAL MUSIC IN THE SCHOOLS

The National Band Association Board of Directors established as a primary task in December, 1984, the development of a statement of purposes of instrumental music education in the schools. The statement, delineated by NBA Past-President William J. Moody, was approved by the NBA Board of Directors in December, 1985. The NBA statement identifies the purposes of instrumental music education and links these purposes with the need for strong, continued support of music in the curriculum.

The National Band Association urges school administrators to evaluate instrumental music programs in terms of educationally justifiable objectives. Such an evaluation is needed so that administrators can refute criticism by those for whom the arts are not “basic,” and redirect programs that overemphasize competition, entertainment, and popular music.

Education in instrumental music is similar in purpose to education in English; in both subjects, understanding and self-expression are the desired outcomes. The emphasis is on individual progress rather than on the accomplishments of a class or musical ensemble. The basic objective of instrumental music education is for students to learn performance skills in order to understand the musical language and to experience the joys of recreating music in the expressive medium of their choice.

The most profound emotions of the human condition are expressed through the symbolic language of music. In 1983, the College Entrance Examination Board wrote that, “Works of art often involve subtle meanings and complex systems of expression. Fully appreciating such works requires the careful reasoning and sustained study that lead to informed insight. Moreover, as thorough understanding of science requires laboratory or field work, so fully understanding the arts involves firsthand work in them.” To accomplish these ends, an instrumental program should offer a broad range of musical experiences. There is an extensive solo and chamber music repertory that provides subtle opportunities for nuance and complex systems of expression. The school jazz ensemble stresses rhythmic precision, understanding of harmonic progression, and creative improvisation. The core of the program, however, is the school orchestra and concert band where our musical heritage is transmitted through inspirational compositions by the most creative composers.

Service activities such as marching band are often important to the school and community; there are social, educational, and musical values gained through participation. Evaluative competition can raise standards and motivate progress. The National Band Association strongly supports these activities and recommends that all bands participate in festivals or contests sponsored by their district and state professional education organizations. Nevertheless, the integrity of the instructional program is threatened by a disproportionate emphasis on competitions and service-related performances. Marching band activities that require extra rehearsals and travel time should be scheduled with concern for the many responsibilities that students have in addition to their musical studies, and must never be the focus of the instrumental music program.

Pluralism is one of this country’s strengths. Our nation is indeed at risk if we neglect aesthetic education in an effort to emphasize science and technology. Students who elect instrumental music do so for a variety of reasons: as an outlet for creativity, as a source of enjoyment which enhances the quality of life, as a possible career choice, for gratification that comes from recognition by responsive audiences, for the development of social skills learned through cooperative efforts in musical organizations, for the self-discipline learned from study and practice, to give service to school and community.

The arts provide unique forms of knowledge, present a basic means of communication, and produce lasting works that are the hallmarks of a civilization. The United States is a land of opportunity when the schools develop individual talent, whether it be in music or other areas of interest. Students who are encouraged to develop their own talents and interests participate in a continuous regeneration of democratic ideals.