

A Response to “Music Education in Alberta: The Contribution of School Music Programs” (Thomas Dust & Amanda Montgomery)

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Dust and Montgomery (2005) provide a comprehensive picture of music education offerings from Kindergarten to Grade 12 in Alberta. This reader appreciates that these researchers have obtained data from Alberta education, thereby adding credence to their claims. I examine this article in terms of the following questions: (1) What is the current state of school music in Alberta? (2) What are the reasons for this current status? and (3) What changes might reverse current trends? In doing so, I relate some of their findings to my knowledge of school music in Manitoba.

The bulk of this article is devoted to reporting on the current status of music education in Alberta. In summary, we find that general elementary music is compulsory for all children. In large part, generalist classroom teachers deliver rural programs; music specialists are more common in urban centers. This is similar to the situation in Manitoba where there are insufficient numbers of qualified music teachers for rural positions. Moreover, due to low enrollments, few rural schools are able to employ full time music teachers. This places teachers in the position of working part time, teaching in more than one school, or teaching a variety of subjects to gain full-time employment.

Conversely, music specialists provide instruction in optional programs (choral, general, or instrumental) at the junior and senior high levels. High schools may offer

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additional programs such as jazz, marching band, or chamber ensembles. Dust and Montgomery (2005) report that a large number of high schools do not offer music instruction. This, coupled with an apparent downward trend in music offerings in high schools that currently offer music, provides a somewhat bleak picture of the current status of music education in Alberta. This is mitigated by the fact that many junior and high school programs in existence are outstanding. What does it mean to be outstanding? One might denote outstanding music programs as those in which groups of students attain high levels of musical performance. Others might consider outstanding music education as that which encourages students “to make meaning out of musical experiences and to use music as a means of personal expression” (Wiggins, 2001, p. 3). In this reader’s view an examination of this question will shed further light on the current status of music education, not only in Alberta, but also across provincial boundaries.

Dust and Montgomery (2005) offer several reasons for the current status of music education in their province. They report that instrumental programs are found in schools with populations of over 600 and are staffed by specialist music teachers with the expertise needed to attract the students needed to build and maintain strong programs. This reveals an inequality between urban and rural schools with students in urban areas being offered more diverse programming in music than their rural counterparts. The authors also report that a general lack of interest in singing has resulted in a decline in choral offerings. In this regard, Dust and Montgomery refer to the fact that teacher training in the province has focused more on instrumental than choral programs, thereby limiting the supply of choral teachers. This presents a problem for teacher education. Do pre-service programs prepare personnel for instructional areas where there is limited

demand for their services or do teacher educators count on the rejuvenation of choral music education based on an increased availability of qualified instructors? There is no easy solution to this dilemma.

Students in Alberta are allowed course credits for private study at Conservatory Canada, Royal Conservatory of Toronto, or Mount Royal College. On reflection, I wonder how this impacts school music programs. While I am sure there is no way to answer this unequivocally, this is a question Dust and Montgomery might explore should they continue their research in this area.

Dust and Montgomery (2005) contend that “If school music classes are really going to make a difference in young people’s lives, both curriculum choices and teacher qualifications must be enhanced” (p. 13). In reflecting on their work, I wonder what these possibilities might be. Current offerings are centered on programs in choral, general, and instrumental music education. Perhaps it is time to replace the term ‘general music’ with specific descriptors and content relevant to the musical lives of students in the 21st century. The authors suggest offering guitar classes at the middle and senior high level. Guitar programs are currently available in several urban schools in Manitoba (W. McCallum, personal communication). These established programs might provide guidance for initiatives in Alberta.

How might teacher qualifications be enhanced? For the most part, programs charged with the preparation of future music teachers place high demands on students in terms of credit requirements. Enhancing current programs is not simply a matter of increasing the number of required courses to prepare pre-service teachers for new curriculum options in the Kindergarten to Grade 12 system. Truly enhanced teacher

qualifications will require that institutions of higher learning carefully consider current programs in terms of the perceived needs of future in-service personnel and revise programs accordingly. This is a time-consuming process. When we consider the possible benefits future music teachers and their students will gain from this process, it is well worth the effort.

Clearly, there is much work to be done. Kudos to Dust and Montgomery (2005) who contribute to this dialogue by reviewing the current state of school music programs in Alberta and providing information relevant, not only to those interested in music education within the province in which they teach, but to their colleagues across Canada.

References

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