



The State of Music in the Elementary School: The Principal's Perspective

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This study is an examination of school principals' perceptions of the elementary school music curriculum. A survey, mailed to 350 elementary school principals (61% response rate), was designed to answer the following questions: What are principals' perceptions of music learning outcomes and broad educational goals that result from school music instruction at their respective schools? How do they believe these should exist in ideal conditions? Is there a difference between principals' ratings for current and ideal conditions? To what degree do certain variables affect the music program? Results revealed that principals were generally satisfied with their music programs' ability to meet music education standards and broad educational goals. However, significant differences between the current and ideal conditions imply that they believe improvement is possible. Principals reported that the No Child Left Behind Act, budgets, standardized tests, and scheduling had the most negative effects on their music programs.

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The State of Music in the Elementary School: The Principal's Perspective

Throughout history, philosophers, religious leaders, aristocrats, and civic officials have described music education as a necessary component of society (Mark, 2002). Today, principals, school boards, and other community leaders are responsible for making curricular decisions based on a variety of beliefs and rationales. Within a school, the principal often facilitates the implementation of the curriculum and monitors its ability to meet broad educational goals. Teachers often depend on the support of the principal to meet their specific objectives and enhance their programs. This assistance is especially crucial in music education programs, where the building principal can help establish schoolwide support for the music curriculum. Clark (1999) states, "unless the value of music education is recognized within a school, adequate resources, funding, and equipment will not be committed. Principals play a vital role in creating a supportive environ-

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ment for music" (p. 43). For elementary music educators to garner this support from school administrators, it is important to understand administrators' perceptions of the learning outcomes and broad curricular goals in music education.

Researchers have investigated administrators' perceptions of the school music curriculum. Punke (1972) compared the views of school administrators and music teachers in Colorado about the role of music in the public school curriculum. Respondents completed a survey, organized into five specific areas: (a) music's role in public relations, (b) music as a discipline of the mind and body, (c) music as a social activity, (d) music as an aesthetic art, and (e) music as a leisure time activity. Results indicated significant differences for three items: Principals believed that winning athletic teams were more effective at fostering improved school-community relations than outstanding musical performing groups; music teachers indicated that music should be taught as an academic subject while administrators did not; and music teachers suggested that students were not given enough opportunities to create their own music, whereas administrators remained uncertain. Music teachers thought that music had greater potential for building community relations, fostering creativity, and curricular equality. In a replication of Punke's study, Liddell (1977) compared the attitudes of school board presidents, superintendents, principals, and music teachers toward school music. Mean scores for the music teachers were significantly higher than all other respondents in all areas except responses related to music's role in public relations. As a result of these findings, Liddell suggested that music educators consider keeping administrators and school board members informed about the importance of music in the curriculum.

Payne (1990) asked administrators and music teachers to rank a series of music education justification statements. Results indicated that while music teachers and school superintendents rated the statement related to music education as "aesthetic education" highest, school board presidents and building principals rated the utilitarian benefit of developing "self-esteem" highest. Hanley (1987) also investigated the attitudes of music teachers and administrators, but included teachers of other subjects as well. Subjects were asked to perform two *Q*-sorts in which they ranked a series of statements corresponding to one of four philosophical approaches to music education (music for fun, referentialism, formalism, absolute expressionism). For the first *Q*-sort, respondents ranked statements based on what they observed as current practice. For the second, respondents ranked statements based on what they considered the ideal situation. Results revealed a difference between actual and ideal situations, with more respondents labeling the absolute expressionist position ["the essential nature of music is its ability to provide rich, significant, feelingful experiences without referring to something outside the music" (p. 43)] as the ideal approach for music education.

While the researchers in the aforementioned studies sought to investigate administrators' opinions for public school music broadly, investigators in other studies have looked at school administrators' perceptions of specific curricular programs in music. Greenwood (1991) examined the perceptions of secondary school principals about the role of music and school bands in the school curriculum. Principals generally agreed that music programs and bands should be responsible for helping students reach both musical and nonmusical goals. Respondents considered teaching cooperation, encouraging self-discipline, and promoting good public relations as the most important nonmusical goals for a music/band program. Teaching performance skills and musical concepts, providing opportunities for self-expression, and identifying the musically gifted were the highest-rated musical goals. These findings are consistent with Milford's (1995) survey of high school principals in Ohio. Stroud (1980) surveyed principals' attitudes toward elementary general music. Results indicated that over 97% of the principals believed all children should be exposed to music. Respondents also indicated strong agreement with the idea that use of leisure time, development of good citizenship, and integration into other school subjects were important outcomes of an elementary school music program. The aforementioned studies support the idea that while school administrators seem to support music in the schools, their goals and objectives may differ from those of music educators.

Other researchers have looked at the way values manifest themselves in specific aspects of the music curriculum. Rogers (1985) surveyed high school band directors and principals across the United States to determine their attitudes toward marching band contests. Band directors rated the personal benefits for students highest and the musical benefits lowest. In contrast, principals rated improving public relations highest and improving financial support for the band lowest. Principals rated the areas of general education experience, personal benefits to students, motivation and recruitment, and improving public relations significantly higher than did band directors.

Another aspect of the music program in which perceived values about elements of the curriculum can be seen is grading. McCoy (1991) investigated how choral and band directors at high schools in Illinois determined grades for students in their performing organizations, and how these grading systems compared with those proposed by principals. Results indicated that principals considered performance technique to be the most important criterion, while ensemble directors weighted concert attendance most heavily when assigning grades. Overall, directors relied more on nonmusical criteria to determine grades, while principals assigned more weight to musical criteria.

Many of the reviewed studies examined the implementation of curricular values in music education practice in broad terms or focused on the secondary level. These investigations involved examining how administrators apply value for music programs

given specific situations. In addition, researchers in previous studies have attempted to capture a “snapshot” of a school administrators’ beliefs regarding the place of music in the school curriculum. It is possible that a difference exists between administrators’ self-reported value for music education and the implementation of these values given current educational realities. There is a need for research to focus this sort of examination on the elementary general music curriculum.

A recent Gallup poll (2003) indicated that 95% of respondents believed music to be a key component in a child’s well-rounded education, and more than three-quarters of those same respondents thought that schools should mandate music education (Gallup, 2003). In a similar vein, in-service elementary educators have been shown to value specialized instruction in music as an important part of the school curriculum (Abril & Gault, 2005). However, an overall increase in music programs has not been noted in current investigations related to this issue. A recent study conducted by the Music for All Foundation (2004) used data from the California Basic Educational Data System to examine and compare the amount of music instruction in California schools over a 5-year period from 1999–2000 through 2003–2004. A comparison of enrollment figures, percentage of student involvement, and total number of music teachers indicated a 50% decline in student involvement in music education courses and a 26.7% decline in the number of music teachers. Based on the interviews of educators and policymakers, researchers speculated that this could be attributed to the current California budget crisis and the implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act.

A survey of 956 elementary and secondary school principals from Illinois, Maryland, New Mexico, and New York indicated that three-quarters of respondents noted an increase in instructional time for reading, writing, and mathematics as a result of the No Child Left Behind Act (Council for Basic Education [CBE], 2004). Twenty-five percent indicated a decline in instructional time for the arts, with 33% anticipating further decreases as a result of the legislation. In Byo’s (1999) survey of classroom teachers’ and music specialists’ perceived ability to implement the National Standards for Music Education, respondents in both groups ranked instructional time, equipment, and materials for music instruction as extremely limited. Byo concluded that “curriculum planners and administrators are strongly encouraged to design curricular models that result in increased instructional contact time for both generalists and music teachers, while increasing the resources available to generalists to implement the standards” (p. 121). An investigation of how principals see legislative, budgetary, and other restraints affecting their ability to implement what they perceive to be the most effective music education curriculum would provide further insight regarding how educational goals are often revised as a result of outside influences.

The purpose of this study was to investigate principals' perceptions of the elementary general music curriculum. The following questions guided the study: (1) What are elementary school principals' perceptions of music learning outcomes as they are currently being met and as they should be met under ideal conditions? (2) Is there a difference between principals' perceptions of current and ideal conditions? (3) What are elementary school principals' perceptions of broad educational goals as they are currently being met and as they should be met under ideal conditions? (4) Is there a difference between principals' perceptions of current and ideal conditions? and (5) What are principals' perceptions about the degree to which certain variables affect music education in their respective schools?

METHOD

Survey Instrument

A survey was designed to measure respondents' beliefs regarding general music education in the elementary school. The construction of the survey was informed by reviewed research, the National Standards in Music Education, and discussions with local music educators and principals. A draft of the survey was examined by individuals with expertise in either elementary school administration, elementary school music curriculum, arts policy, or research. Comments and suggestions provided were considered in the revision of the survey.

The final version of the survey was divided into four sections. Section 1 was used to collect demographic information about the principal's professional and educational experience, school, and music program. Section 2 consisted of a list of seven music-learning outcomes, modeled after the National Standards in Music Education (e.g., create and compose music, understand music in relation to culture and history). Using a Likert-type scale (strongly agree = 5; strongly disagree = 1), principals indicated the degree to which they believed the music program was able to facilitate students in meeting these learning outcomes. They also indicated the degree to which they believed the music program should meet these outcomes in ideal circumstances. Principals were given the option to check a "Can't Answer" box if they did not have enough background to provide an informed answer. A Cronbach's alpha coefficient was calculated to measure internal consistency of the survey items ($\alpha = .86$). In the third section, principals responded to a list of 14 broad educational goals that might arise from school music instruction in both current and ideal conditions (i.e., develop creativity, transmit cultural heritage, improve intelligence) ($\alpha = .96$). In the fourth section, principals determined the degree (strongly positive = 5; strongly negative = 1) to which they believed 10 variables currently affect their music programs (e.g., music teacher, research, parents, standardized tests) ($\alpha = .79$). The overall alpha coefficient for all three sections of the survey was .94.

The final section of the survey consisted of two open-ended items: (a) describe the greatest obstacles hampering your ability to support the music program at your school, and (b) describe anything you think might assist you in alleviating those obstacles. Principals were asked to complete the survey independently and return it anonymously using a self-addressed return envelope enclosed in the mailer.

Sample

A random sample of 350 was drawn from a list of 8,506 active elementary public school principals enrolled as members of the National Association of Elementary School Principals. An initial mailing, a follow-up, and two reminders yielded a 61% response rate. Surveys were returned from principals representing various regions of the United States: Midwest (32%), Northeast (27%), South (26%), and West (15%). These proportions closely reflected the membership of the population from which the sample was drawn. One of the responses was not used because the principal no longer worked at the elementary level. Respondents ($N = 214$) reported the length of their service as elementary school administrators to be as follows: under 1 to under 5 years (28.5%),¹ 5 to under 10 years (30.8%), and 10 or more years (40.7%). Most principals worked in suburban (40.7%) and rural (39.3%) locations, with a smaller percentage in urban settings (20%). The majority of schools (92.5%) required music education, a handful offered it as an option, and only one school failed to offer any music instruction. Most schools employed music specialists (94.9%), whereas some used classroom teachers (4.7%). The decision to employ a music specialist rested with the school board and/or superintendent (69.3%), the principal (24.9%), or a combination of both of these (5.4%). Four principals reported that a school committee/council was responsible for deciding whether to hire a music specialist. Contact hours for those that offered music instruction at the primary level (K–2nd grade) were as follows: less than 1/2 hour per week (4.2%), 1/2 hour to under 1 hour per week (54.7%), 1 hour or more (39.3%). Contact hours at the intermediate level (3rd–5th grade) were: under 1/2 hour (6.1%), 1/2 hour to under 1 hour (48.6%), 1 hour or more (44.4%).

RESULTS

Preliminary analysis of survey results by school setting (rural, suburban, urban) revealed similar means and variances among groups. Since populations from which subjects are drawn can be assumed to be equal if there is homogeneity of variance, all subsequent analyses were conducted without stratifying the sample (Keppel, 1991). In the first research question, we sought to determine principals' perceptions of music learning outcomes as they are currently being met and as they should be met in ideal conditions. Table 1 presents descriptive statistics for these results. Responses were generally positive, with

Table 1

Mean, Standard Deviation, and Rank for Music Learning Outcomes in Current and Ideal Conditions

	Listen	Perform	Relate Culture/ History	Read & Write Music	Relate to Other Subjects	Analyze	Create & Compose
Current							
<i>M</i>	4.29	3.82	3.68	3.62	3.54	3.31	2.87
<i>SD</i>	(0.66)	(0.98)	(0.93)	(1.01)	(0.94)	(1.02)	(1.14)
Rank	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Ideal							
<i>M</i>	4.57	4.41	4.46	4.20	4.52	4.26	4.00
<i>SD</i>	(0.51)	(0.66)	(0.60)	(0.75)	(0.60)	(0.75)	(0.84)
Rank	1	4	3	6	2	5	7

Note. Bold numbers indicate the highest and lowest means for each condition.

all mean scores above the midpoint (2.5). The highest mean (and lowest standard deviation) in regard to current conditions was “listening to music attentively.” Principals seemed to be aware that music instruction focused on developing listening skills in students. The lowest mean score (and highest standard deviation) was “creating and composing music.” Principals seemed to be less aware that students were composing and creating music in the classroom. Listening and creating were also rated highest and lowest in ideal conditions, respectively. “Performing music” had the second-highest mean for current conditions but was fourth in ideal conditions. While “understanding music in relation to other subjects” had the fifth-highest mean for current conditions, it had the second-highest mean in ideal conditions. Mean scores for each variable were rank-ordered, and a Spearman correlation was calculated to measure the degree of consistency between current and ideal conditions. Results indicated a moderately positive relationship in which increases in current conditions were accompanied by increases in ideal conditions ($r_s = .68$).

With the second research question, we examined the differences between current and ideal conditions for music learning outcomes. The “ideal” mean ratings were consistently higher than the “current” mean ratings for all variables measured. Repeated measures *t*-tests were used to test for statistical significance. Results indicated that there were significant differences ($p < .01$) between current and ideal states of music education for all variables under investigation. The

magnitude of the effect was calculated for each variable using a Cohen d value. The variables that had a large effect size were: "understanding music in relation to other subjects" ($d = 1.10$); "creating and composing music" ($d = 1.04$); "analyzing, evaluating and describing music verbally and in writing" ($d = .97$); and "understanding music in relation to culture and history" ($d = .86$). The following variables had medium effect sizes: "listen to music attentively," "read and write musical notation," and "perform music."

In Question 3, we sought to determine principals' perceptions of broad educational goals as they were currently being met and as they should be met in ideal conditions. Table 2 (on the following page) presents a descriptive summary of these data. Mean scores for every goal were generally positive. The lowest mean score was "fostering critical thinking" in the current music program; the highest were "developing creativity" and "transmitting cultural heritage." The lowest score for the ideal music program was "providing students with a pleasant diversion during the school day"; the highest score was "developing creativity in students." Most of the scores between current and ideal conditions closely paralleled one another except for "transmit cultural heritage" and "teach students to work cooperatively."

As in the previous part of the survey, means were consistently higher for the ideal versus the current conditions. Correlation analysis revealed a strong positive relationship between current and ideal conditions ($r_s = .81$). Repeated measures t -tests yielded significant differences ($p < .01$) between current and ideal conditions on all broad educational goals. However, none of these differences had a high effect size. Those with medium effect sizes were: "foster critical thinking," "facilitate learning in other subjects," and "improve tolerance, understanding, and acceptance of other cultures."

The final section of the survey measured the degree to which 10 variables were perceived to affect the music program. Means and standard deviations for these ratings are shown in Table 3. There were no variables that posed strongly negative effects. Four of them had means that indicated a neutral to negative effect on music education. The percentage of principals who responded with either negative or strongly negative responses was as follows: "budget/finances" (55.2%), "No Child Left Behind Act" (45.1%), "scheduling" (40.1%), and "standardized tests" (34.4%). The factors that were perceived to pose positive or strongly positive effects on the program included: "students" (92%), "parents" (90.1%), and "the music teacher" (87.8%). These results were compared to the open-ended responses that asked principals to describe the greatest obstacles they face in supporting the music program and anything that might assist them in alleviating these obstacles.

One hundred sixty-seven of 214 principals provided responses for the first open-ended question. Several respondents provided multiple answers, resulting in a total of 231 statements. These statements fell into six general categories: (1) financial/budgetary (31.6% of

Table 2
Mean, Standard Deviation, and Rank for Each Broad Educational Goal in Current and Ideal Circumstances

	Creativity	Transmit Culture	Sensitivity to Arts	Cooperative Learning	Lifelong Learning	Self-Esteem	Understand Music in Life	Future Involvement in Arts	Self-Expression	Intelligence	Understand Other cultures	Learning in Other Subjects	Diversion	Critical Thinking
Current														
<i>M</i>	4.16	4.16	4.13	4.09	4.08	4.08	4.06	4.04	4.03	3.91	3.91	3.87	3.82	3.73
<i>SD</i>	(.88)	(.80)	(.75)	(.83)	(.84)	(.83)	(.81)	(.80)	(.87)	(.87)	(.81)	(.92)	(1.03)	(1.02)
Rank	1.5	1.5	3	4	5.5	5.5	7	8	9	10.5	10.5	9.5	13	14
Ideal														
<i>M</i>	4.69	4.58	4.63	4.54	4.61	4.54	4.51	4.59	4.59	4.45	4.47	4.51	4.06	4.44
<i>SD</i>	(.58)	(.65)	(.63)	(.66)	(.64)	(.68)	(.69)	(.65)	(.65)	(.80)	(.76)	(.80)	(1.15)	(.80)
Rank	1	5.5	2	7.5	3	7.5	9.5	4	4	12	11	9.5	14	13

Table 3
Means and Standard Deviations for the Effect of Each Factor on the Music Program

	No Child Left Behind	Financial/ Budgetary	Standardized Test	Scheduling/ Time	Upper Administration	Research	Classroom Teachers	Students	Parents	Music Teachers
<i>M</i>	2.54	2.67	2.74	2.87	3.63	3.70	4.01	4.20	4.21	4.37
<i>SD</i>	(.81)	(1.16)	(.82)	(.98)	(.86)	(.73)	(.73)	(.98)	(.82)	(.86)

Note: Bold numbers indicate factors that were below a mean of three.

total responses), (2) scheduling/time (22.5% of total responses), (3) staffing (13.4% of total responses), (4) outside pressures (testing, legislation, upper administration, community attitudes) (12.99% of total responses), (5) no obstacles (11.26% of total responses), and (6) facilities/equipment (7.79% of total responses). Many responses that cited pressures outside the school as the greatest obstacle preventing the implementation of an ideal music program cited the No Child Left Behind Act ("We spend more money on unfunded mandates than ever before. Especially NCLB ...") or specific state standards/tests ("The state mandated tests—time is filled with preparation for testing in 4 core areas," and "There's increasing accountability in reading and math"). This is consistent with the findings of section four of the survey in which these two items were rated as having a neutral/negative effect on the music program. Respondents also had many comments related to the other two items rated in the neutral/negative category on the survey: budget/finance-related issues ("Budget crunch is the biggest obstacle facing the arts") and scheduling issues ("Scheduling to ensure all mandated courses are in first"). A few principals addressed staffing problems ("There is a lack of certified teachers in music"). When asked to describe anything or anyone that could assist them in eliminating the obstacles described in the first open-ended response, 102 principals provided 140 statements. Like the statements from the first item, responses providing solutions were organized into six categories: (1) monetary (increased funding, grants, etc) (35.71% of total responses), (2) legislative, testing, mandates, attitudes toward the arts (25% of total responses), (3) teacher-related (15.71% of total responses), (4) scheduling (14.29% of total responses), (5) facilities/equipment (5% of total responses), and (6) no suggestions (3.57% of total responses). As with the first statement, many of the responses addressed the four issues receiving neutral/negative ratings in section four of the survey: (1) No Child Left Behind Act and standardized tests ("Consideration of standards-based teaching as only one means of determining school effectiveness; there need to be multiple avenues of determining efficacy"), (2) budget ("Fund schools equally—our school receives about \$1,000 per student less than the state average"), and (3) scheduling ("More time for music class—more than one hour per week").

DISCUSSION

In this study, we investigated school principals' perceptions of learning outcomes arising from elementary general music education. A second purpose was to ask them to rate the degree to which certain variables affected music programs at their schools. Positive ratings for all learning outcomes indicated that principals believe music programs at their schools were meeting various music education standards. These ratings for learning outcomes were even higher when measuring them as they should be met in ideal circumstances, indicating that principals in this investigation placed a high value on these standards.

The fact that “listen to music attentively” had the highest mean rating for both current and ideal conditions indicated a strong value for this learning outcome. Principals may consider listening to be an essential skill in music, as well as in most other curricular subjects. Principals may have also observed these behaviors, which are common in general music classrooms. As such, they may have come to expect listening to be a substantial facet of a music curriculum. There were significant differences between the current and ideal conditions, with four learning outcomes resulting in large effect sizes: “understand music in relation to other subjects,” “create and compose music,” “analyze, evaluate, and describe music verbally and in writing,” and “understand music in relation to history and culture.” These variables had the greatest mean differences between what principals believe is happening and what they think should be happening. The difference between current and ideal conditions with regard to the variable “understand music in relation to history and culture” supports previous findings (Stroud, 1980). Principals seem to value the ways music can connect with other subjects, such as writing, history, and multicultural studies. Music teachers might consider these matters to be peripheral to music, so they figure less prominently within their music curriculums. Alternatively, they may be a part of the curriculum that is less obvious and visible to those observing the program from the outside. Music teachers might consider finding more effective ways to share student achievements in these areas in order to provide administrators with an accurate perception of learning arising from music education.

Similar results were uncovered for the broad educational goals. While all mean scores were positive, ideal ratings were consistently higher than current ratings. This seems to indicate that principals consider music education to have greater potential for meeting both musical and nonmusical goals. Under ideal conditions, “developing creativity” was considered to be the most important of broad educational goals, yet “create and compose music” was considered to be the least important music learning outcome. There are several plausible explanations for these seemingly contradictory results. Principals might consider “creating and composing music” to be a narrow view of creativity. They might also consider performing music to be a form of creating. However, “developing creativity,” in the broad sense, might seem to have applications in other subjects and contexts. A greater effort on the part of music teachers to demonstrate the link between creating music and the development of general creativity might help raise the value of these activities in the eyes of school administrators.

The significant difference between the current and ideal conditions for all the broad educational goals is consistent with results reported by Hanley (1987). However, none of these differences produced a large effect size. The following variables with medium effect sizes are worth noting: “foster critical thinking,” “facilitate learning in other subjects,” and “improve tolerance, understanding, and acceptance of

other cultures.” Alternately, principals may consider these goals important enough to warrant continued improvements. The lowest rating provided for the ideal condition was “provide students with a pleasant diversion during the school day.” It seems that principals do not object to music being fun, but they do not think it should be a primary goal of a music program. These results are consistent with the views of in-service elementary school teachers (Abril & Gault, 2005).

The final section of the survey revealed that principals were aware that certain factors had a negative effect on the music program: No Child Left Behind Act, budget, standardized tests, and scheduling. A large percentage of principals considered these factors to have a negative impact on their music programs. These findings are consistent with studies conducted by the Music for All Foundation (2004) and the Council for Basic Education (2004). It seems that the pressures imposed by current legislation and state budget problems do have an effect on elementary school music programs. Open-ended responses provided corroborating evidence. A longitudinal study of specific music programs to measure the effect of these variables over a number of years might yield some specific evidence of how music programs are coping in the current educational landscape. In looking at solutions that would lead to greater support of music programs, administrators cited increased funding, possibly through outside sources, and increased awareness of the benefits of arts programs as possible options. Comments such as “a greater awareness of our stakeholders on the benefit of a strong music program” and “education of school board members and parents” indicate that many principals felt the need for more education for parents and upper administration as to the goals of a music program. Principals considered music teachers, parents, and students to have a positive effect on the music program. Arts policymakers should capitalize on these constituents when seeking support for music education. Music teachers can also serve as advocates of music education and their program by providing principals (and other decisionmakers) with evidence of children’s learning.

On a positive note, most principals surveyed (92.5%) reported that music education was a required component of the elementary school curriculum. Furthermore, 94.9% claimed to employ a music specialist at their school. This is evidence of support for music education by administrators and policymakers at schools represented in this study. It should be noted that 39% of sampled principals failed to return their surveys. Therefore, caution should be exercised when generalizing beyond the 61% of principals who did return the survey. However, similar results were reported in an earlier study (Stroud, 1980). Many of the principals surveyed claimed to be fully charged (24.9%) or partially charged (5.4%) with the decision to hire a music specialist at their school. Therefore, it behooves the profession to gain a better understanding of administrators’ goals for music education. Continued advocacy and research efforts can help build increased support for music education.

NOTE

1. Percentages do not always equal 100% due to rounding errors and/or responses that were not applicable.

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