

Music Educators Journal

<http://mej.sagepub.com/>

The Implementation of the National Standards in Music Education: Capturing the Spirit of the Standards : What were the National Standards intended to accomplish? What are the challenges in implementing them?

Colleen Conway

Music Educators Journal 2008 94: 34

DOI: 10.1177/00274321080940040104

The online version of this article can be found at:

<http://mej.sagepub.com/content/94/4/34.citation>

Published by:



<http://www.sagepublications.com>

On behalf of:



[MENC: The National Association for Music Education](http://www.menc.org)

Additional services and information for *Music Educators Journal* can be found at:

Email Alerts: <http://mej.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

Subscriptions: <http://mej.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

Reprints: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

Permissions: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

The Implementation of the National Standards in Music Education: Capturing the Spirit of the Standards

By Colleen Conway

What were the National Standards intended to accomplish? What are the challenges in implementing them?

A decade after the release of the National Standards for Music Education in 1994, Bennett Reimer suggested a reconceptualization of the standards.¹ He proposed that change was still needed, saying, “Music offerings in United States schools have remained largely the same for well over half a century.”² In addressing the standards specifically, Reimer stated his belief that “we have succeeded magnificently in Standards 1 and 2, singing and playing, for those students who have elected to pursue those areas ... Comparatively, we have accomplished dismayingly little with the other seven standards.”³ Reimer went on to provide strategies for including more students in music programs through diverse ways of interacting with music.

A few months after the Reimer article appeared, MENC editor Lisa Renfro interviewed Paul Lehman regarding where we have come as a profession since Lehman’s involve-

ment with the creation of the 1994 standards document.⁴ Lehman expressed pride in how the standards have led the profession to better clarify instructional goals, although he suggested that the assessment of these goals was still a challenge. He also expressed concern about professional-development support of teachers in some of the content areas. At the conclusion of that interview, Lehman suggested that the improvement of instruction is one of the greatest challenges still facing the profession:

Much of today’s discussion of educational issues focuses on the No Child Left Behind Act. That law is based on the best intentions, but it suffers from serious shortcomings, most of which are inevitable given our tradition of state and local control of education. Our major problem is that the law places too much emphasis on testing and not enough on the improvement of teaching. It seems to

Colleen Conway is associate professor of music education at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. She can be reached at conwaycm@umich.edu.

be based on the assumption that teachers, students, and schools could all do their jobs satisfactorily if only they would try harder. But high-stakes testing alone is not enough; it must be accompanied by a massive, systematic, focused effort to improve the quality of instruction. In my view, that is the most immediate and pressing need facing education today.⁵

Whether one supports the Reimer view that drastic change in the profession is needed or the Lehman view that we are headed in the right direction but need continued focus on instruction and assessment, continued reflection on the National Standards may be useful.

Spirit of the Standards

I have done curriculum development with dozens of school districts since the release of the National Standards, and it is always interesting to me to hear of the various program designs used to meet the standards. On one side of the spectrum I have seen schools with abundant resources and well-developed music programs interpret the standards only as a guide for the offerings for a department. For example, Standard 1 (Singing alone and with others) is met in choir, Standard 2 (Playing alone and with others) is met in band or orchestra, Standard 3 (Improvising melodies, variations and accompaniments) is met in jazz band, Standard 4 (Composing and arranging music within specified guidelines) is met in a technology course, and so forth. Only if a child took every music course offered at the school would he or she actually encounter instruction across all of the standards. It is my sense that this model does not represent what I am going to call the “spirit of the standards.”

On the other side of the spectrum, I have seen districts get so detailed in documenting work in all nine content areas that performance ensembles suffer and students drop out of the music program. There is no one-size-fits-all approach to designing curricula based on the standards; however, I interpret the “spirit” of the standards to be that whatever route a child takes to graduation (performance ensembles, guitar class, music theory, or whatever the choice) he or she will receive some instruction in each of the nine content areas. The degree to which one standard is focused on more than another will change in relation to the focus of a program and the philosophical beliefs of the teachers.



Photo by Becky Spray

To fulfill the intent of the standards, students need to perform both in ensembles and alone.

In the next section, I examine each of the nine standards and invite reflection on what might be the spirit of the standard in addition to discussing what may be challenging regarding interpretation and implementation. A list of selected articles that address the spirit as suggested are listed by standard in the sidebar “Suggested Readings.”

Standard 1: Singing Alone and with Others

It would seem that singing is one of the standards that most music teachers would agree is an important skill for the music student. However, even in elementary general music settings I have observed what I would consider a misinterpretation of the spirit of this standard. Teaching children to sing must start with an understanding of how one learns to sing and this knowledge is needed by all music teachers—not just those in general music or choral music programs. Most children need some guidance in finding their singing voice and will need a sequence for learning to sing with good intonation.

I often work with instrumental music teachers who were not prepared to sing with children, and when they try to teaching kids to

Additional MENC Resources for Standards-Based Instruction and Assessment

Standards for Music Education

- *National Standards for Arts Education: What Every Young American Should Know and Be Able to Do in the Arts* (1994).
- *Opportunity-to-Learn Standards for Music Instruction: Grades PreK–12* (1994). This book includes standards for curriculum and scheduling, staffing, materials and equipment, and facilities.
- *The School Music Program: A New Vision—The K–12 National Standards, PreK Standards, and What They Mean to Music Educators* (1994).

Applying the Standards in the Music Classroom

- *Benchmarks in Action: A Guide to Standards-Based Assessment in Music* (2003) and *Composing and Arranging: Standard 4 Benchmarks* (2002). Both books provide sample student work at the basic, proficient, and advanced levels.
- *Performance Standards for Music: Strategies and Benchmarks for Assessing Progress Toward the National Standards, Grades PreK–12* (1996).
- *Spotlight on General Music: Teaching Toward the National Standards* (2005). This collection of articles from the state MEA journals has teaching ideas for each of the nine standards.
- *Strategies for Teaching* series. This series offers teaching strategies illustrating how the music standards can be put into action in the music classroom. It consists of 13 books spanning the K–12 areas of band, chorus, orchestra, general music, strings/orchestra, guitar, keyboard, and specialized ensembles. The series also includes a prekindergarten book and a guide for college music methods classes.

Impact of the Standards on Music Education

- *Aiming for Excellence: The Impact of the Standards Movement on Music Education* (1996).
- *Performing with Understanding: The Challenge of the National Standards for Music Education* (2000). Edited by Bennett Reimer, this book, with chapters by leading music educators, is based on a Northwestern University Music Education Leadership Seminar.

sing, they miss some of the basics of singing instruction. For starters, it is important to establish tonality before singing so that students begin to hear tunes in their tonal context. By establishing tonality, I mean providing a tonic and dominant context for the singing. Singers know that good key areas for children's singing include D or E-flat. These keys encourage kids to find their singing voices. I often hear instrumental teachers say, "sing your part at letter B," and then students perform a rhythmic chant and provide the rhythm for their notation and nothing more. For me, this is a misinterpretation of the spirit of the standard. When teachers ask students to "sing" they must be sure they are asking for a pitched response in a tonal context so

that students leave music classes with an understanding of what it means to "sing."

Standard 2: Playing Alone and with Others

In the same way that not all instrumental music programs encourage students to sing, it may be said that not all vocal music programs encourage students to play (although I would suggest that many vocal students do have opportunities to perform on Orff instruments and percussion). Another issue to consider with both Standards 1 and 2 (singing and playing) is the suggestion that students sing or play *alone* and with others. The spirit of this idea is that students have opportunities to sing or play by themselves and that

teachers are knowledgeable of student achievement in singing or playing alone. This point aligns with Lehman's previously mentioned concern about assessment of standards. Unfortunately, I am aware of many vocal and instrumental music programs where students are never asked to sing or play alone. I don't think this represents the spirit of the standard.

Standard 3: Improvising Melodies, Variations, and Accompaniments

The standard of improvisation is probably one of the most controversial content areas identified in the standards. Teachers in the profession hold a variety of beliefs and ideas regarding what represents improvisation—ranging from free and unstructured exploration to carefully controlled responses to specific musical questions. When I attempt to interpret the spirit of this standard, I am drawn to the words "variations" and "accompaniments" and am led to think that the standards intend for students to improvise within specific structures. This is not to suggest that free and unstructured exploration is "wrong," but that it may not provide the skills focus that many music teachers are trying to achieve with very little instructional time.

As a way of illustrating these issues, let me share an activity I regularly used when I was working with second-year instrumentalists in an elementary band setting. To introduce my students to improvisation, I taught them to play the concert B-flat blues scale. I provided each student with a scale sheet and we learned the notes of the scale. I would play a twelve-bar blues progression and invite students to improvise using any note of the blues scale. It was a great activity. Everything the students played (as long as they played a note from the scale) sounded good. It was very creative—students could make up whatever rhythms they wanted within the twelve bars allotted for their solos—and provided a safe classroom environment for introducing the idea of solo playing. I would still use this activity; however, with just a bit more preparation, I now believe there are ways to take it and truly work on musical skills in addition to creating a safe and fun environment.

In the blues-scale activity, my students were choosing pitches from a scale sheet without any aural planning or sense of what their solo might sound like. Many of the teachers I work with now take this same idea of student solos and teach students to improvise over the harmonic structure (beginning with a I/V/I progression in major or minor tonality). If students are taught the terms tonic and dominant and know which pitches are in which chord, then improvisation with comprehension can occur. Students can be asked to sing their improvisations with solfège before playing them so that the teacher can assess the level to which the student can audiate the harmonic changes.

Christopher D. Azzara offers some excellent strategies for this sort of improvisation, and I believe they better reflect the spirit of the standards than the activity I shared.⁶ I stress, there is nothing “wrong,” so to speak, with free exploration and creative activities. However, since many music teachers are pressed for time and have high performance demands, if there is a way to combine improvisation with skills-based instruction, maybe more teachers will be able to find time for improvisation. The bottom line to the spirit is for students to view music as an “aural art” and not to rely on notation as the only way for music to be made.

Standard 4: Composing and Arranging Music within Specified Guidelines

The issues associated with composing and arranging music are similar to those associated with improvisation. I hear many teachers discuss how they wish they had time to work on composition, but the high profile of performance (even in elementary general music!) makes teaching this standard difficult. Composition approached from an aural basis may allow students to learn to compose as well as increase their ability to audiate in performance. The spirit of composing within specified guidelines would suggest that teachers provide students with musical structures within which to compose (i.e., within major tonality or triple meter). Students may be asked to sing or play their compositions, so it is not only a creative outlet but also a way to

enhance tonal, rhythmic, and musical sensitivity skills as well as connect back to Standards 1 and 2.

Music teachers also struggle with the music-writing skills (clef signs, stem direction, and so on) associated with composition and must develop sequential approaches to teaching this content as well. Teaching and learning through composition can result in stronger musical skills that students can transfer to performance as well as increased experiences with personal creativity. The spirit would seem to be that students understand they are capable of creating their own music and that all musicians can be “composers.” Teachers who are able to demystify the compositional process by providing sequential instruction in how to compose help students capture the spirit.

Standard 5: Reading and Notating Music

It is fitting that Standard 5 is in the middle of the list, as I see issues of musical literacy as the core of all music instruction. Approached with audiation in mind, Standards 1–4 (singing, playing, improvising, and composing) will enhance music literacy. Standards 6 and 7 (listening, describing, analyzing, and evaluating music) can all be means to the music literacy end as well. When I ask teachers in any school district to define what they believe to be “reading music,” most teachers respond with something like, “looking at the page and knowing what it is supposed to sound like.” The spirit of Standard 5 is to teach in a way that promotes audiation before notation. Edwin Gordon states:

Audiation takes place when we assimilate and comprehend in our minds music that we have just heard performed or have heard performed some time in the past. We also audiate when we assimilate and comprehend in our minds music that we may and may not have heard but are reading in notation or are composing or improvising.⁷

Richard F. Grunow, Edwin Gordon, and Christopher D. Azzara add: “To audiate is to ‘hear’ and to comprehend music for which the sound may or may

not be physically present. Audiation is to music what thought is to language.”⁸ All of the well-known music education methodologies (Orff, Kodály, Suzuki, Gordon’s Music Learning Theory) support the concept of “rote before note,” and yet in my experience, much music instruction introduces notation long before students are musically ready to read. Gordon discusses four “vocabularies” of music learning: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Music teachers at all levels are encouraged to work to provide solid listening vocabularies (through modeling and providing many tunes in a variety of tonalities, meters, timbres, and musical styles) in addition to providing opportunities for students to “speak” in music (through singing, moving, chanting, playing, and improvising) before notation. Once students have the necessary readiness for reading music provided by solid activities in listening and speaking, notation with understanding can be achieved as the spirit of Standard 5.

Standard 6: Listening to, Analyzing, and Describing Music

Standard 6 represents content that I think most music teachers do provide in music classrooms in the spirit of the standards. Most music teachers at all levels provide listening activities, and they often ask students to describe what they are hearing. What may sometimes be overlooked in this standard is the recommendation that students “analyze” as well as listen and describe. Analysis requires audiation as well as musical vocabulary to discuss the elements of music. The spirit of Standard 6 cannot be met without sequential instruction and skills-based learning. Children need to be taught to hear and label the differences between major and minor tonality, duple and triple meters, tonic and dominant harmonic functions, and so forth. They need a logical rhythm syllable system that can be understood without notation and they need instruction in solfège so they have the vocabulary to listen, describe, and analyze. Listening lessons that focus on hearing the elements of music (melody, harmony, rhythm, texture, and form) will assist in capturing the spirit of Standard 6.

Suggested Readings

Standard 1

- Conway, Colleen M. "Good Rhythm and Intonation from Day One in Instrumental Music." *Music Educators Journal* 89, no. 5 (May 2003): 26–32.
- Robinson, Mitchell. "To Sing or Not to Sing in Instrumental Class." *Music Educators Journal* 83, no. 1 (July 1996): 17–21, 47.
- Rohwer, Debbie. "The Value of Singing in the Instrumental Music Program." *Dialogue in Instrumental Music Education* 19, no. 2 (Fall 1995): 73–86.

Standard 2

- Liperote, Kathy A. (2006). "Audiation for Beginning Instrumentalists: Listen, Speak, Read, Write." *Music Educators Journal* 93, no. 1 (September 2006): 46–52.
- "Special Focus: Assessment in Music Education." Special issue, *Music Educators Journal* 86, no. 2 (September 1999): 19–40.
- Spotlight on Assessment in Music Education*. Reston, VA: MENC, 2001.
- Lindeman,Carolynn A., ed. *Benchmarks in Action: A Guide to Standards-Based Assessment in Music*. Reston, VA: MENC, 2003.
- Performance Standards for Music: Strategies and Benchmarks for Assessing Progress Toward the National Standards, Grades PreK–12*. Reston, VA: MENC, 1996.

Standard 3

- Azzara, Christopher D. "An Aural Approach to Improvisation." *Music Educators Journal* 86, no. 3 (November 1999): 21–25.
- Inks, Kimberly (Burns). "Standard 3 Is Risky Business: Practical Ideas for Improvisation in the Classroom." *Teaching Music* 12, no. 5 (April 2005): 22–26.
- Marshall, Herbert D. "Improvisation Strategies and Resources for General Music." *General Music Today* 17, no. 3 (Spring 2004): 51–54.
- Hickey, Maud, ed. "Special Focus: Composition and Improvisation." Special issue, *Music Educators Journal* 88, no. 1 (July 2001): 17–46, 53.
- Riveire, Janine. "Using Improvisation as a Teaching Strategy." *Music Educators Journal* 92, no. 3 (January 2006): 40–45.
- Volz, Micah D. "Improvisation Begins with Exploration." *Music Educators Journal* 92, no. 1 (September 2005): 50–53.

Standard 4

- Hickey, Maud, ed. "Special Focus: Composition and Improvisation." Special issue, *Music Educators Journal* 88, no. 1 (July 2001): 17–46, 53.
- Hickey, Maud, ed. *Why and How to Teach Music Composition: A New Horizon for Music Education*. Reston, VA: 2003.
- Riley, Patricia. "9 National Standards, 1 Composition Project." *Teaching Music* 13, no. 4 (February 2006): 24–28.

Standard 5

- Dalby, Bruce. "Teaching Audiation in Instrumental Classes." *Music Educators Journal* 85, no. 6 (May 1999): 22–25, 46.
- Gordon, Edwin E. "All about Audiation and Music Aptitudes." *Music Educators Journal* 86, no. 2 (September 1999): 41–44.
- Thompson, Keith P., ed. Special issue on Gordon's music learning theory, *General Music Today* 8, no. 2 (Winter 1995): 3–21.

Standard 6

- Campbell, Patricia Shehan. "Deep Listening to the Musical World." *Music Educators Journal* 92, no. 1 (September 2005): 30–37.
- Cavner, Delta, and Elizabeth Gould. "Whole Language and Music-Listening Instruction: Part 2 of 2." *Music Educators Journal* 89, no. 5 (May 2003): 19–25.
- Dalby, Bruce. "Toward an Effective Pedagogy for Teaching Rhythm: Gordon and Beyond." *Music Educators Journal* 92, no. 1 (September 2005): 54–61.

Standard 7: Evaluating Music and Music Performances

In searching for the true spirit of Standard 7, I find more questions than answers. Students in ensembles are often asked to evaluate themselves or their ensemble in preparation for or after a performance. Although this is one way of addressing this standard, it may not be enough to really capture the spirit. To teach students to "evaluate music," teachers must begin by asking, "What makes a musical work worthy of being studied in a music class?" and "Who says?" The spirit of Standard 7 forces teachers to consider big-picture issues of music education curricular philosophy. As teachers grapple with these issues and make decisions about what music to teach, they also must learn how to teach music from diverse cultures. For children to evaluate music, they must have enough experience with a variety of musics to make informed decisions about quality. Although there are a growing number of resources available to teachers to assist them in this spirit, issues of time can make Standard 7 a challenge to implement.

Standard 8: Understanding Relationships between Music, the Other Arts, and Disciplines Outside the Arts

Although there are considerable resources available to teachers for meeting the content suggested by Standard 8, I find that most teachers do little in this area. This may be due to the fact that Standard 8 is the "least musical" of the nine standards, and with inadequate time for teaching music, teachers just never get to understanding relationships between music, the other arts, and disciplines outside the arts. It may also be that music teachers are least comfortable in teaching this standard, since most of us have considerable expertise in music, but not as much in teaching topics outside of music. Elementary music teachers seem to be able to tackle this standard more easily than performance ensemble teachers.

Sometimes an excellent interdisciplinary lesson can grow out of a hallway conversation with a colleague from elsewhere in the school. Performance ensemble teachers are

well known for staying down in the band, choral, or orchestra room during lunch to continue their good work with students. The spirit of Standard 8 suggests that an occasional lunch in the teacher's lounge might provide valuable insight for interdisciplinary learning. It is possible to learn music through interdisciplinary work, but the pressure of performance and issues of time make this standard a challenge. Any effort music teachers can make to collaborate with other teachers in the school may improve the curricular status for music in the school.

Standard 9: Understanding Music in Relation to History and Culture

Standard 9 is another example of content that most teachers address to some degree. Most teachers provide instruction regarding the music performed in ensembles or studied in a general music textbook. I think the challenge in meeting the spirit of the standard is to realize that the standard reads "understanding music in relation to history and culture" and not "understanding middle school band music (or substitute any particular music class setting)." This standard challenges music teachers to provide a comprehensive offering of music regardless of the course.

To meet the spirit of Standard 9, music teachers in all types of music classes must provide a broad base of music for singing, playing, improvising, composing, reading, listening, analyzing, evaluating, and studying. This might be accomplished in tandem with other standards-based activities. For example, students in an instrumental performance ensemble may begin every rehearsal with a short listening lesson that includes a focus on understanding music in relation to history and culture. The music used for the lesson may be purposefully chosen to represent styles and genres not regularly performed in the ensemble. Even a brief gesture towards a comprehensive music education such as the example given here brings us closer to the spirit of the standard.

Concluding Thoughts

Capturing the spirit of the standards is no easy task. Music teachers

Suggested Readings (continued)

Jarjisian, Catherine. "Can We Get Students to Listen?" *Music Educators Journal* 84, no. 6 (May 1998): 26–29.

McDonald, Nan, and Douglas Fisher. "Strings Attached: A Musical Listening Unit." *Music Educators Journal* 88, no. 5 (March 2002): 32–38.

Rappaport, Howard. "The Infinite Variety of Listening Logs: Your Students May Astound You." *Music Educators Journal* 91, no. 3 (January 2005): 29–34.

Standard 7

Beck, Charles R. "Sensitizing Students to Famous Operatic Arias and Voices." *Music Educators Journal* 90, no. 1 (September 2003): 31–36.

Burrack, Frederick. "Introduce Score Study to Your Band." *Teaching Music* 12, no. 4 (February 2005): 62–65.

Music Educators Journal (2005). Special Focus Issue on Curriculum.

"Special Focus: Reconceptualizing Curriculum." Special issue, *Music Educators Journal* 91, no. 4 (March 2005): 17–44.

Standard 8

Burrack, Frederick, and Tammy McKenzie. "Enhanced Student Learning through Cross-Disciplinary Projects." *Music Educators Journal* 91, no. 5 (May 2005): 45–50.

Burton, Leon H., ed. "Special Focus: Interdisciplinary Curriculum." Special issue, *Music Educators Journal* 87, no. 5 (March 2001): 17–44.

Wiggins, Jackie, and Robert Wiggins. "Integrating through Conceptual Connections." *Music Educators Journal* 83, no. 4: 38–41.

Standard 9

Austin, James R. "Comprehensive Musicianship Research: Implications for Addressing the National Standards in Music Ensemble Classes." *Update: Applications of Research in Music Education* 17, no. 1 (Fall–Winter 1998): 25–32.

Fallis, Todd L. "Standards-Based Instruction in Rehearsal." *Music Educators Journal* 85, no. 4 (January 1999): 18–23, 50.

Russell, Joshua A. "Building Curriculum-Based Concerts." *Music Educators Journal* 92, no. 3 (January 2006): 34–39.

Wells, Richard. "Designing Curricula Based on the Standards." *Music Educators Journal* 84, no. 1 (July 1997): 34–39.

must not only interact with children in different ways; they also need to educate parents, administrators, and community members about the musical goals of the standards and the need for sequential skills-based instruction in music. I don't know whether after another decade of grappling with the standards has passed, we as a profession will feel that we are any closer to the "spirit" of the 1994 version. However, anything that encourages the profession to reflect on its goals and approaches is worth spending time thinking about.

Notes

1. Bennett Reimer, "Reconceiving The Standards and the School Music Program,"

Music Educators Journal 91, no. 1 (2004): 33–38.

2. *Ibid.*, 33.

3. *Ibid.*, 34.

4. Lisa Renfro, "Raising the Bar: Paul Lehman Assesses 10 Years of National Standards," *Teaching Music* 12, no 2 (2004): 34–41.

5. *Ibid.*, 39.

6. Christopher D. Azzara and Richard F. Grunow, *Developing Musicianship through Improvisation* (Chicago: GIA, 2006).

7. Edwin E. Gordon, *Learning Sequences in Music*. (Chicago: GIA, 1997).

Richard F. Grunow, Edwin E. Gordon, and Christopher D. Azzara, *Jump Right In: The Instrumental Series Teacher's Guide* (Chicago: GIA, 2001).

8. *Ibid.*, 19. ■