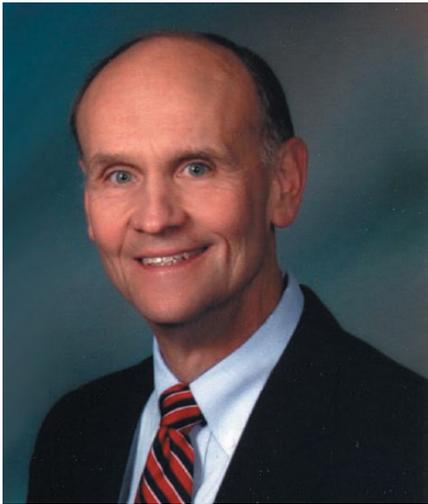


From the President's Keyboard

Strategic Priorities—Focusing on Standards and Student Dispositions

by Glenn E. Nierman, NAFME President



It's happening already: with the American presidential election still over a year away, the news is filled with stories about the candidates. In this election year in the United States, we hear considerable rhetoric about the ability of the candidates to work with those in other parties and those with opposing views. What is needed is a political leader who can “work across the aisles,” say many commentators, “someone who can recognize the values and positions of ‘the other side of the house.’” This same analogy might be used in the current debate over what's important to be taught in our schools—knowledge (as promoted in the science, technology, engineering, and mathematics subjects) or the

dispositions that are promoted in the humanities that can be applied across many different subjects throughout a lifetime. As to what content should be taught, much has been said about the importance of the knowledge (cognitive) “side of the house”—what students know about the core concepts of a subject—but little has been said about the importance of the other side—the dispositions (affective dimensions).

I would like to focus on the dispositions that often accrue to students in high-quality music education programs and that are part of the well-rounded education needed for students to succeed in the years ahead. In these From the President's Keyboard articles, I have been focusing on how to implement the five strategic priorities that your National Executive Board has identified as important to achieve in the 2014–16 biennium: (1) implement the new Music Standards, (2) increase membership, (3) define active roles for our societies/councils, (4) design new mediums for professional development, and (5) develop the NAFME Strategic Plan 2017–22. This article about important student dispositions is a corollary to implementing the new Music Standards (Strategic Objective 1).

What Are Dispositions?

For years, curriculum development was driven by a framework proposed by Benjamin Bloom in his book *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives: The Classification of Educational Goals* (1956).¹ Bloom's taxonomy divides educational

objectives into three “domains”: cognitive, affective, and psychomotor (sometimes described as “knowledge/head,” “feelings/heart,” and “skills/hands,” respectively). It is the affective domain—the area that includes values, beliefs, attitudes, and feelings—that is most closely aligned with dispositions. In the early 2000s, educators and policy makers, while focusing on how to define an effective teacher, seemed to settle on a common set of concepts—knowledge, skills, and dispositions (note the similarity to the Bloom domains)—to identify the primary constructs of an effective teacher.

Why speak of *dispositions* rather than the *affective domain*? Perhaps the answer lies in the fact that it was observed that teachers who had the same skills and knowledge were not uniformly effective teachers. Given the necessary knowledge and skills, what *disposes* a person to be an effective teacher? The attention to dispositions is particularly evident in the accreditation standards of the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education in 2001, as it defined professional dispositions in its online glossary as “professional attitudes, values, and beliefs demonstrated through both verbal and nonverbal behaviors as educators interact with students, families, colleagues, and communities.”²

From the attitudes, values, and beliefs demonstrated by effective teachers to the attitudes, values, and beliefs (dispositions) demonstrated by students to be effective learners is a “small step.”

The writers of the revised National Core Arts Standards recognized that while these learner dispositions develop irregularly and over relatively long periods, they are, nonetheless, an important dimension of learning to which an education in music and the arts contributes greatly. Music classes, over time, develop valuable dispositions, such as the ability to work with others toward common goals, inquisitiveness, flexibility, openness/respect for the ideas and work of others, and responsible risk taking.

Why Are Dispositions Important?

Just as teachers might have a wealth of knowledge and skills but be relatively ineffective teachers, so students might know a great deal about the chemical makeup of a substance (knowledge) and how to carry out an experiment to verify that makeup (skills) yet be relatively ineffective scientists because they lack the inquisitiveness and the ability to work with others (dispositions) to design a practical application for the substance. Examples of the importance of dispositions are all around us. I have a former trumpet student who became an art major and now works for a major greeting card company. On a recent visit to his workplace, he told of how members of the creative teams were chosen to design a new line of greeting cards. Some members were skilled in their ability to render the drawings to be sure, but others were divergent thinkers with the ability to see multiple solutions for ways to design the cards so that they would be attractive to multiple buyers. These divergent thinkers might have had formal training in music or literature rather than in art. They learned to seek multiple solutions—to be creative—and then to transfer that skill to other situations.

Sociologists and others tell us that most millennials will change career foci five or more times in a lifetime. Some of

the knowledge and skills they are learning today will be irrelevant in the next decade. Developing dispositions that allow for adaptation and transfer will be extremely important to millennial students' future quality of life.

Dispositions and the Revised Standards

If indeed nurturing students' dispositions is important, than how do they connect to the revised National Music Standards (2014)? The revised standards have a process orientation. That is evident from examining the basic components of each three major artistic processes—creating, performing, and responding. In the Content Standards from 1994 National Music Standards, Standard 1 was about “singing alone and with others,” and Standard 2 concerned “performing on instruments.”³ In the artistic process of performing in the revised Standards, for example, presenting through performance is only one of the components of performing. Students must also be able to select, to analyze, to interpret, and to rehearse/evaluate/refine before they are ready to sing or to play an instrument in a performance.⁴

In the past, teachers, not students, did most of the selecting, the analyzing, and so on. If a student is going to be able to accomplish these process components, he or she must have certain knowledge and a number of skills that are developed because the student brought certain dispositions to the learning encounter. Students can't hope to analyze and to interpret music successfully without having some basic knowledge about musical form, meters, and how to play in various modes. That's why the suggested sample lesson plan forms for the revised Standards (available at shop.nafme.org) ask teachers to think about the prerequisite knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary for students to master before they can achieve the new Performance Standards.

A Final Thought

We as teachers can all do a better job of orchestrating success for our students in the future if we remember to “reach across the aisle” to help them develop the dispositions necessary to learn new knowledge and skills that will lead to a high-quality personal and professional life for many years to come.

NOTES

1. Benjamin S. Bloom, ed., *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives: The Classification of Educational Goals* (New York: Longman, Green, & Co., 1956).
2. National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education, *NCATE Glossary* (n.d.), <http://www.ncate.org/Standards/NCATEUnitStandards/NCATEGlossary/tabid/477/Default.aspx>.
3. MENC: The National Association for Music Education, *The School Music Program: A New Vision* (Reston, VA: Author, 1994), vi.
4. National Association for Music Education, “Core Music Standards (Ensemble)” (Reston, VA: Author, 2014), <http://www.nafme.org/my-classroom/standards/core-music-standards/>.

**“Solitary the thrush,
The hermit withdrawn to himself,
avoiding the settlements,
Sings by himself a song.**

**Song of the bleeding throat,
Death's outlet song of life (for
well our dear brother I know,
If thou wast not granted to sing
thou would'st surely die.)”**

—Walt Whitman, “When Lilacs Last
in the Dooryard Bloom'd”
(poem written in 1865 after the
assassination of Abraham Lincoln)