Like many of you, I constantly advocate for music education on my campus, in my district, and in the community. It can be exhausting, but I know it’s critical. A second-grade teacher recently reported back from an ARD where the child’s parent directly asked, “What do they even do in music?” While parents aren’t always well versed in what goes on in every subject, they often seem surprised to hear how vast and in-depth the answer is to that parent’s question.

A student’s parent was hired as a paraprofessional on my campus and began attending music for inclusion support. After participating in her first kindergarten lesson, she said, “Wow, they’re like . . . learning music.” It was as if that wasn’t the obvious plan.

As mentioned, I’m constantly trying to inform and educate parents, colleagues, and administrators on exactly what students are doing and learning in elementary music. The scope and sequence for music is posted on my page of the elementary website, and I frequently cite it as a resource for parents to see what their child is learning each year. At the beginning of the school year, I attend all the grade-level orientations so I can introduce myself and inform parents about the website and opportunities their child will have in music this year. Our school district produces a weekly newsletter, and I frequently submit articles and photos of what is going on in my classroom. I also have students perform (and inform) to the school board at least once a year.

Performance Anxiety

When I first began teaching, every grade level performed with sets and costumes. I quickly learned how exhausting that can be. While those big performances can be memorable, as I built the curriculum and scope, I realized how much instructional time was required to prepare and how little educational benefit seemed to result, except for the actual performance.

Another issue I experienced with such orchestrated performances that included solos and speaking roles was that parents often wouldn’t place priority on their child’s preparation. Soccer practice, scouts, or simply not wanting to go often trumped the school’s musical performance. While holding informances doesn’t automatically solve that issue, it does reduce some of the stress of worrying who will show up and hoping all parts are covered. It also limits the amount of time necessary to rehearse onstage, which reduces stress when sharing space with multiple departments.

We do still present traditional performances but with less hoopla. The events are still memorable for the students, and I get positive feedback from both parents and administrators.

A Celebration of Learning

The word informance with specifically young children was discussed in a 2010 article in General Music Today entitled “Using
Informance to Educate Parents and Demonstrate the Music Learning Process.” Author Christine M. Nowmos stated:

Informances, informal and informative presentations of student learning that emphasize the learning process, provide an alternative to traditional concerts or programs, which may take general music classroom time away from activities not geared toward a specific performance. Informances are an excellent means of communicating educational objectives to parents and sharing what and how students learn, which is not always possible through a traditional concert.

The topic was further discussed at the secondary level in the 2011 book Technology to Unlock Musical Creativity and Education Closet defined an informance as a “Celebration of Learning” in a 2015 article.

**Student-Led Informances**

Most of the informances we’ve presented are still what most would consider a concert but with either the students or me explaining what skills students are demonstrating. Because of their unfamiliarity with the term, I often still refer to these events as “concerts.”

I lead a music club that meets weekly, and for the past couple of years the club has focused on learning the ukulele. Before their informance, we reviewed the skills and songs the students had learned, and they got to choose which songs they wanted to perform at the event. Students volunteered to speak about each concept or skill and introduced the songs and what skills they would demonstrate during each selection. Before the event, students divided into small groups to practice one song of their choosing and perform it as an ensemble. The small groups also decided how much help they wanted (e.g., whether they wanted to be counted in or wanted the whole group to sing along or only listen). My role during this style of informance is to sit in the back and let the students take the lead as much as possible. I run the slide show to keep students on track with the name of the student who has volunteered to speak at the bottom of each slide.

Another example of a student-led informance is what I called “The Life of a Kindergarten Musician.” Each class had a separate inFORMANCE, presenting songs and concepts they learned during the year. The introductions to songs and skills were written out and assigned based on students’ reading levels, which I got from our reading facilitator. Speaking parts were also assigned a color so students were able to step forward with their color groups. Some students memorized their part. Being kindergartners, students did require more cueing than the older ukulele students, but they were able to follow the pattern. While not as convenient for parents, we had this informance during the school day to ensure all students could participate.

**Teacher-Led Informances**

Teacher-led informances are the most similar to a traditional performance. In this type of informance I do most of the speaking, and there are bigger groups of students involved. We still review concepts and skills learned during the course of the school year and I try to include a variety of activities to showcase to parents. Between each song, I explain to the audience what skills students are performing in each piece. Last year, second graders did an informance like this, and one of their pieces was “Pease Porridge.” Students first performed the song using solfège and hand signs. Then, half the group came forward to play an ostinato on the Orff instruments to accompany the remaining students singing the melody. The students who sang the melody then had the opportunity to demonstrate accompanying the piece on the instruments. Teacher-led informances are much more informal than traditional concerts. At the end of the event, I told parents what units of study were going to come next in the scope and where they could find further information about music at our school.

**Parent Participation Recommended**

Involving parents can be fun, but be prepared for some strange looks when you ask them to join in. I lead these events as if they were a class and encourage parents to participate with their child. Parents play boomwhackers, folk-dance, and much more! We hold this event in the cafeteria so we can have a more open space for moving around.

Each activity includes a brief introduction about the skills and concepts learned. When doing this type of informance with third grade, I use the song “Old Brass Wagon.” Students answer questions about sixteenth-note patterns and their usage in the song and then clap the rhythm of the song for their parents. I then invite parents to clap the pattern with the students. After reading the rhythm, I show work samples of students’ writing of the pattern as well as rhythmic compositions featuring sixteenth notes. We then proceed to the middle of the cafeteria and perform the folk dance to accompany the song.

Another example of a parent participatory informance we have held is a school-wide specials showcase. Because this is much wider in scope and grade level, it doesn’t offer an opportunity to go into
detail about specific concepts and skills taught in your curriculum. It is a chance, however, to open that line of communication and advertise the wonderful things going on in your class, even if you can’t go into specifics. My campus has five specials plus P.E., so those are the destinations in this event. Everyone starts in the library and then each specialist takes a portion of the group to their classroom for a quick demonstration. Groups rotate every 15 minutes so they can learn more about all the specials and P.E. I present where on our website to find information about music at our campus and club opportunities, and I usually lead one or two fun boomwhacker or movement activities.

Get Ready for Mass Chaos

The Science of Sound Music Extravaganza is an annual informance we hold after completing a unit on instruments of the orchestra. Students in fourth or fifth grade begin a project where they create their own instrument using recycled materials. Students spend two class periods in small groups creating instruments. Then they decide which family their newly created instrument belongs in based on how the instrument creates sound and the family with which it shares the most characteristics. This project ends with the Gallery of Created Instruments being one of the stations at the Science of Sound Music Extravaganza. This is a come-and-go event and the entire school is invited. I solicit help from classroom teachers and other specialists to help run the other stations, including the Instrument Petting Zoo, Create Your Own Kazoo, and the Chrome Music Lab. More information about the Science of Sound Music Extravaganza, originally called Music PBL Night, can be found on my blog linked from www.tmea.org/coffeyblog.

I hope you now have some ideas about how you can better answer the “What do they even do in music” question for your campus and district. My goal is, of course, to educate my students in music but it is also to advocate for the inclusion of a quality music education for every child. What better way to advocate than through demonstration!

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