

ETM: The Podcast

Episode 14: with Deb Confredo, part 2

TRANSCRIPT

Noah: You are listening to Education Through Music, the podcast. As always, I'm your host, Noah, and this is part two of a two-part episode in which I am interviewing Dr. Deb Confredo, who is NAFME's president-elect. We resume our conversation right where we left off, with a discussion of the Music Teacher Profession Initiative and its report on its findings. So I'm reading through the report, I'd say I'm about halfway through at this point. I got started yesterday. Very readable, very compelling also, it's a bit of a page turner, which you almost never get to say, about a piece of education research. So, I encourage everybody listening who's even remotely interested in sort of the plight of the music teacher and music education in the country to to have a look. But I'm wondering if it would be possible to summarize some of the results so that people might know what they're in for as they take a look at the document, which they can find at the NAFME website.

Deb: Yeah, so that's a hard thing to do because there's so much in there, but I will do my best. First of all, thank you for your feedback. I love the fact that you feel it's readable. To have it be accessible, I think, is really important because we want to make sure that as many people as possible do feel compelled to read it and then, based on what they find in it, feel compelled to help, like you said, it's going to take a lot of folks to be able to move things. So the reader's digest version. I keep going back to the reader's digest, I don't know if anybody reads. I still read the reader's digest, but you know I'm saying the truncated version. What..so what I should probably say is that we... in our discussions with our participants, we focused on three areas of interest. Right, so what were, what are the problems and mitigations that people felt were prevalent before the degree program? So, before anyone chooses to become a music educator, during the degree program, and then after the degree program, in the first five years of professional life. And the reason why we chose those first five years is because most of the data that exists in education tells us that those first five years for any young teacher is absolutely critical. It's a time when most of us make a decision to stay in the profession or to leave the profession, so they're sort of the golden years, and we wanted to be sure that we were helping, we were gathering data to help as much as possible at all three of those times in a prospective music educators life, and remember that our focus is opening that pipeline so that we, so that our profession becomes more diverse for several reasons, not the least of which is that you know, the population of the school going children today is you know, well, let me... I'll give you some data. So the National Center for Education Statistics tells us that by 2030, the percentage of white students to black and brown students will be well below 50%, while black and brown students will be well above 50%. And so then we look at our own profession and we say we don't look like that. We are not representing the communities that are being represented in the schools, and that's a problem, right, because we want to make sure that we are honoring people's lived experiences. We want to look at our own strategic plan that is couched in equity, so that we're doing the right thing for all people at all times. So that's sort of the preamble to all this. So before the degree program, and I'm just going to give you a couple of bullet points about some of the findings. None of these are going to be particularly surprising, but they all needed to

be stated. So we found financial hurdles, right. So financial hurdles can come in all kinds of forms, you know, it's not quite as expensive to sing in a choir as it is to play in an orchestra or a band or a jazz ensemble or a percussion ensemble or whatever. So financial hurdles to get instruments to children, for private instruction, for all those kinds of things. Even transportation becomes a bit of a hurdle as well if you live far away from the school center. Inequitable distribution of human resources, right, so you might be one music teacher, for example, who's servicing lots and lots of schools. This happens quite a bit in rural areas where, you know, sometimes we think about urban centers only, where there are issues of distribution of human resources, not just the urban centers, but it's the rural centers as well where I might be an itinerant teacher, where I'm going from school to school, to school to school. I'm an N of one, and is that the best way to serve our students? We also found that there's negative perceptions of teaching, and that unfortunately is, I think it's worse today than it ever has been. For lots and lots and lots of reasons, many of which are political, and I don't think we should get into that right now. But one of the things that we are committed to at NAFME and I think most of the state MEAs, is to make sure that kids know and parents know that this is a profession that's not only a good one but it's necessary, and we have the Herculean task of molding and shaping young lives, and we get to do it through music. So we have to really break down those barriers that come to all of our prospective music educators in terms of their perception of teaching. And then you and I talked about this a little bit before we turned the recording on, about that single paradigm of what music education is, right. And so, you know, for so long we've been stuck in this sort of Western you know, classical European model, right, and that's served us really well for a long time. The problem with it is it's very myopic, right. It focuses on one type of music with one type of musician. Where, we're living now in a world where barriers are being blurred, where the lines are being blurred. We can access music from all over the world at the touch of a keystroke, right, and so we have access to all kinds of world musics. We have all kinds of students from different populations who are in our communities, who are celebrating musically in ways that we are not bringing into the school experience. So that single paradigm of music needs to be shaken up a little bit, maybe a lot, and also that issue that we talked about, you know, reading versus hearing. Some of the mitigation categories, of course, parallel that. So more resources, more funding, getting rid of school and district level inequities, limitations of school music programs, widening the school music program, giving better perception of going to college, focusing on the auditions right, performance constraints and financial resources that sometimes keep kids out because they can't pass an audition. So that's basically prior to getting through the door. Those are...that's the Reader's Digest version. So during the degree, and again I'm going to give you those little bullet points. So again, no surprise, right, we find financial hurdles for lots of prospective students. If I...if my family doesn't have a whole lot to send me to school and I can be the best music educator on the face of the earth, I'm not going to get there because I don't have the financial wherewithal to be in a program. Why? Because scholarships are limited and a lot of times scholarships are given to those who can perform the best, and sometimes that's not always our music educators and nor should it be. Why? Because our musicianship is demonstrated in all kinds of things. So I'm a sax player, I play pretty good saxophone, but I'm also pretty good at keyboard and I'm good at conducting. I'm good at trumpet, I'm good at fill in the blank, right, and our expectations for music educators are a lot different than a performance person. And where is the scholarship money for that? And so that's

that. I'm kind of mixing my barriers and mitigations here. So, financial hurdles, the dominance of band, orchestra, choir, model, right, the BOC model, B-O-C. Let me make sure that I'm absolutely clear about this. I'm doing what I'm doing because of that model. Right, most of us are doing what we're doing because of that model. We found great joy in being in a large ensemble for lots and lots of reasons. NAFME believes...all of our MEAs believe in the importance and strength and worth of those large ensembles. We also believe that they should not stand alone, that we need to be able to bring alongside the band, orchestra, choir model a lot of other different kinds of musical experiences so that we catch kids who don't identify with the band, orchestra, choir model. I might not want to do that, right, I live down here in Louisiana and we live in the hard-occasion country and so I know a lot of great musicians down here don't really look at music. But, boy, they play a great accordion, they play a great fiddle and they wouldn't fit into that band, orchestra, choir model. So where do they fit in? Right, and that's not just here in Louisiana, that's across the country. We already talked about the Eurocentricity, again, breaking it open so that we are not just Eurocentric. And then we need to be far more culturally responsible, and that goes back to what we talked about recognizing the lived experiences of the students in our communities, of the families in those communities and making that part of what we do during the degree program, right, so that we're educating our future educators to definitely go out into those communities and be able to interact with community members and support the music that comes from those families and those backgrounds. The mitigation categories have to do with getting rid of singularity, right, getting rid of Eurocentrism, equity and access. These are just kind of big, broad ideas, here. Resources and funding need to be expanded so that music educators are at the top of that list. And finally, and this is certainly not least, but take a look at what we can do within the limitations of the credits, that are the credit caps and that dogs us all the time, right. So what can you do in 120 hours, right, and that means working with our good friends in theory and history and conducting and ensembles and the performance studios, so that we are preparing our students for 21st century music classes right, so that they have the right tools. And then, finally, I'll move to after the degree. Remember, this is the first five years of professional life. Our respondents once again identified financial hurdles. So if I'm a young teacher and I'm being paid X number of dollars per year and the expectation is that I have to engage in professional development, because that is an expectation, where's that money going to come from? And often that money is a tax on young teachers, right, it could be conceived as a tax, and so can we mitigate that in any way? What can we do as a society, as an association, as a school district, to help mitigate those issues, those financial hurdles? The other thing has to do with where are those teachers finding those jobs? And there's somewhat of a disconnect between not always, but sometimes in higher ed between where we place student teachers right to do their internship. We generally place them in great schools that are often suburban schools, right, where the music program is fantastic. That's a great experience. The reality is then when we go out and get our first job. The probability that a new teacher is going to fall into a position like that is relatively low. That doesn't say it doesn't happen. It does happen, but it doesn't happen all the time. So what jobs are available? Often the jobs that are available are jobs where there's high turnover rate in rural areas, in urban areas, where, for one reason or another, there's high turnover. Part of that has to do with financing, right. So, taking a look at teachers' salaries, how can we support that? How can we make the profession more enticing, better to look at for somebody who really wants to

make a living at it, right? Another barrier was isolation and lack of community. So, like we talked about this before, where I might be one music teacher and I'm going from school to school, to school to school over the course of a five-day week, five-day school week. Part of the joy of that right is you get to see a lot of kids. The problem with that is that if I'm itinerant, I'm going to spend just a few hours in each school every day, which means that my ability to create social relationships with other teachers in that school is very highly diminished and that creates a sense of isolation. The other issue about isolation is if I am out in a rural center or if I'm in a small school, I might be the only music teacher and I can't share my ideas or my concerns with other people who know what I'm going through right, so that diminishes my sense of community. Professional development we already talked about, that to make sure that we have professional development that speaks directly to new and novice educators, that speaks to their issues, which means that, going back to what I started with, we have to listen, right? I'm a 43-year veteran. I've been doing this a long time. I don't have the same concerns that a young teacher has, so I need to listen to young teachers to make sure that I know what they're going through so that I can do whatever I can to help. And finally, a lack of mentorship Right, so making sure that those young teachers remain connected with their alma maters, the universities that help them to get certified. Also, hooking them up with seasoned teachers, other younger teachers, so that they build this mentoring community, so that they don't feel like they're going it alone, and that mentoring can be informal, it can be formal. It can come through the state music education association. It can come through external organizations. It can come in any number of vehicles. And then some of the mitigation categories, right, so, this is the third time we said that this better sources, better resources, better funding that's going to be always, always, always, a more focused look at professional development, focusing on the quality of life, where for our young teachers, right so, so that we're giving them...we're providing safe spaces for them to talk about their concerns, affinity groups that they can go to, particularly during their time with their state MEA conferences and other times outside of the conference, making sure that they are having social time so that they're having a better balance. We want to focus more on recruitment and retention at a younger level, right so, as they go out into the world we're talking about the, the, the, how wonderful it is to be a music educator, even when we have little guys in front of us, right, so we have to be able to remember why we're in the classroom in the first place and bring that to every single day of our teaching lives and then making sure that we're helping them with relationships and staying culturally relevant. So that is, that's the Reader's Digest version. There's so much more that's in the blueprint itself, but that, in a nutshell, really gives you an idea about what we chatted about.

Noah: Yes, and I anticipate that will sort of wet the listener's appetite to go and check out the rest of it. I'm thinking about what I'm hearing from the perspective of an early career teacher, someone who's finishing up their degree and getting ready to go into the classroom. These mitigation needs are largely the sort of thing that happened in the advocacy space, which is something that Education Through Music is interested in, something that, as a nonprofit, that's sort of part of our game. But from an early career teacher's perspective, I think a lot of music teachers are probably thinking well, you know, when am I going to have time for advocacy work? Are there specific recommendations for mitigation in the report or just in your thinking and

experience, that would be the space where an individual teacher or a small group of teachers would be able to do something?

Deb: Yeah, so, and you're absolutely right. It's especially when you are a novice, a new or novice teacher, you...there is enough on your plate.

Noah: Right.

Deb: Just to get your feet on the ground and to be successful in those first few years, right. So there's a lot that you have to focus on professionally. The issue of advocacy, as you know, Noah, can take many forms, right. It can take, and I'm going to go back to what I said before about mentoring, it can take an informal shape and it can take formal shapes right. So, informally, yet systematically, new and novice teachers can do the work that the advocate does in the classroom, and by that I mean sort of what we said a few moments ago about how we present ourselves in the classroom. Right, this goes all the way back to when I was an undergraduate and I remember one of my methods teachers saying don't hang out in the, in the teacher's lounge, and you know, we kind of all you know, we looked at each other and wondered why. And then he said because everybody complains in the teacher's lounge. Right, you know, and it's easy to cop a negative attitude, and that's not always true, but I can see where he's coming from. And so, you know, we want to stay above that, right, we want to stay positive, forward thinking, forward looking, and that sometimes is difficult, if you know we've got 750 kids to take care of each week and not a whole lot of resources. Still, we control what we can control and what we can control is what happens in our classrooms, in our rehearsal space, right, and so that has to do with how we present ourselves and how we think about what we do as a professional right. So what goes before us. Now, that attitude and it is attitudinal, that attitude is often catching right and it's immediately identifiable if you see somebody getting up on a stage and they're little kiddos, they're going to do a concert or whatever, and you bound on the stage and you just exude energy and you exude happiness and the fact that you're so proud of these kids and you know, almost to the point where you're sort of bursting, right, you can see that, and those are the things. Again, going back to why we decided to do this job in the first place, we have to continue to remember the childlike bit in ourselves and if that goes before us, I think that that serves as advocacy on a relatively informal basis, right, and in doing that, as we present ourselves to parents, to administrators, to other teachers, and we are so engagingly optimistic and positive about what we are doing. People can't help themselves but to sort of come along right, because then we become the Pied Piper. Now there will be naysayers all the time, and that's just human nature. However, my dear departed grandmother always used to say we catch more flies with honey than we do with vinegar.

Noah: That's true.

Deb: Yeah, there are problems. Of course, there are problems in every occupation and every walk of life. Let's focus on the things that we have, that we're working on, that are truly good and workable, and lift our kids up and remind each other that, ok, here are the things that yet need to be done. With this foundation of positivism, we can continue to lift up and there's a ton of

research out there that I would like to see all of us not just new and novice teachers, but all of us be very well versed in. And that is how does music help people? Right, we know far more about the positive benefits of music in people's lives today than we ever have before, right. Back when I was going to school, the default was looking at behavior, right, because we didn't have technology that gave us a deeper dive. So we looked at behavior, we looked at how people responded in certain musical situations and we made inference from that. What we're finding today is that our inferences were pretty pretty spot on. And how do we know that? Well, today we're looking inside people. We're physically looking inside people. We're looking at fMRI images to see how the brain responds to music when we're listening, when we're engaging, when we're playing, when we're singing and we have these images and what we're finding is that there's very little in life that engages the entirety of the brain like music does, right. Especially, especially when kids are little and teeny, tiny, when all those neurons are firing and we're making these connections. Now, that doesn't mean that older folks are out of the game, no, no, no, because music continues to help us far into the depths of our lives, even until the very end, and we know this again through research. So, getting back to how can we advocate? We educate ourselves so that we can give the elevator talk. Advocacy doesn't always have to be marching on Capitol Hill, although marching on Capitol Hill does a lot of good right.

Noah: It also works, yeah.

Deb: But it can be in your backyard being able to have that elevator speech ready for anybody who will listen to you, and that's how young people can sort of hop on that bandwagon, have those data points ready to go. I know that most of the state MEAs have advocacy chairs who can help with that. Remember, we don't want young people to feel like they're alone. They don't have to reinvent the wheel. State advocacy chairs and other folks who work in advocacy in the state MEAs can help to fill in the blanks so that we have those data, those resources to go to. NAFME has toolkits up on our website. That information is relatively easily had and we don't have to go really deep into it. We need to know two, three, four, five things that we can give to folks sort of like you were saying about the blueprint, in readable, digestible forms so that they understand what the worth of music is. It is not a thrill, it is not something extra, it's not something on the side, it's something that must be incorporated in everyone's life, from a very, very early age on, and we also know that it's something that we can do throughout the entirety of our lives. So that's and that's where we differ from a lot of things in life, right? So you know, I love me some sports. You know I'm a Philly sports fan. I love football, I love baseball, I love all that stuff. I'm a heck of a cornhole player. I know that might not count as sports, but there are some things that we can't do later in life. We can do music much later in life and it keeps us focused, it keeps the brain working, it keeps us social and I'm now, I'm being the advocate, now I'm off on a tangent, I don't know if I answered your question, but there are smaller and less formal ways of engaging in advocacy. The other thing too is, and I'll end on this, is that for each individual young person, new, novice, teacher, to look at themselves and think about what can I bring to the table that is novel, that is new, that is an additional type of musical experience that can sit beside that band, orchestra, choir model, whether it's songwriting, music technology, producing composition, any and all of those things. What can I bring that can expand all the possibilities?

Noah: This idea of the teacher in teaching well is an advocacy mechanism, but then also just knowing what every music teacher sort of knows inherently through their experience of being a musician that you know music is good for you and having access to music education is essential, especially at these younger ages where the elasticity of the brain, every child just has so much potential and so if you expose them to this and now I'm advocating, of course. So I think every teacher to some extent is a performer, regardless of their subject area. But what you were saying about a teacher sort of, and as you were describing, this teacher bounding onto the stage with a huge smile on their face and sort of engaging the audience of families and the community I have pictures in my head of great teachers I've seen doing that and I think that while every teacher has to be a performer, music teachers have the potential to be the best performers and I think that that's really important for selling music education to sort of reticent stakeholders, but also just to making this really fantastic experience for the youth as they go through their music education. Should we attend to the fact that you're president elect of NAFME and talk a little bit about what NAFME is all about and what you sort of see in the near future for it?

Deb: The things that I want to do with NAFME. There's just a ton of stuff. What I will say is that Scott Cheehan, our current president, has really done a great job picking up where Max Bradley left off, and he's continued some of her initiatives. He's started several of his own. The MTPI, the Music Teacher Profession Initiative, has come under both her umbrella and Scott's umbrella. So we know, we do know that that work will be ongoing. In fact we are, we're going to be probably making that a permanent structure within NAFME moving forward, a permanent structure within NAFME moving forward. We still have to talk about that with the National Executive Board, but that probably will be happening. So for me, what I'd like to do is to continue a lot of Scott's initiatives and then focus on my own, of course, and a lot of those ideas will be funneled through our strategic plan, and I think I told you before that strategic plan, the keystone of that strategic plan is equity, as we talk about, you know, music teacher preparation and research and then right, all those things, and that will lay the foundation then for a lot of the initiatives that, frankly, will be coming out of the blueprint for strengthening the music teacher profession. One of the things that I would like to do and we're going to be starting on this, I guess at the end of November we have a meeting with several of the partners. I think Education Through Music is going to be on that call to listen to what the partners have to say, to see how you all fit into a lot of the things that we're talking about in the blueprint. NAFME wants to be the sort of the convener of lots of folks, but not be restrictive. So you know, you guys may have some ideas to do some work in Area X, while maybe the Omaha Corporation has ideas that they're going to be working in Area Y and the Sankofa Songs has...you know, they're going to be doing some other things. So we want to be able to celebrate all the things that our partners are doing, especially when they directly or maybe even indirectly connect with some of the ideas in the Music Teacher Profession Initiative blueprint. So we're going to be working hand-in-hand with the partners to a really great degree, I'm hoping. One of the things that I want to do as well and I know Scott's already started this is to start to identify younger people, bring young people on board in leadership positions so that they see themselves as an integral part of what we do at the state level, not just at their local level, but their district level, their state level and also at

the national level. We also want to make sure that the things that we're doing with the NTPI and opening up that teacher pipeline to create a much more diverse music teacher education workforce also is reflected in our leadership, and so we're going to be, you know, working on making sure that there are that voices are heard at the leadership level all across the country and, again, all of these things that will happen through the lens of that strategic plan. I know that you guys do great work in terms of bringing music to people who might not otherwise have access, and that very wonderful philanthropic mission is shared by lots of our other partners as well. And there was a time in my life, frankly, Noah, when I looked at that as being this might surprise you, but a threat to music education in the schools. I don't think about it... I don't look at it that way any longer. They're necessary. You guys are necessary to filling out the picture, right. We're doing what we can in P,K-12 situations and we also know that there are kids who are not privy to music education through those venues. And so what do we do? Do we just say, oh, too bad for you. No, we can't do that. So we're going to do whatever we can again to partner with our friends outside of NAFME to make sure that music is being addressed in all walks of life, from birth, even pre-birth, all the way to the end of life. So it's a lifelong learning process. That's a big bill to fill in two years as a president and I have you know, I don't have any pipe dreams thinking that we're going to accomplish a gazillion things. What I do, what I would like to have happen, is that these seeds that have been planted start to germinate and we see, we see some things starting to pop up that can take root. Sorry for the farming analogy, but it seems to work here. That will take root and will be strong roots that will carry us into the next several years, for whatever presidents come after me. So I see myself as, again, continuing a lot of the things that Scott started, adding some of my own ideas that have come through the blueprint and setting the stage for things to come.

Noah: Well, it promises to be a very exciting two years and I look forward to sort of seeing how all of this, how these seeds germinate and what comes of this.

Deb: Thanks, Noah, and I'm looking forward to our continued partnership. I think that's going to be a wonderful thing.

Noah: Excellent, wonderful, Well, thanks so much, Deb, for your time and for sharing your story and for giving us all this background on the MTPI. I think this was a...I know we could have gone on for hours longer, so I really appreciate this, this much of a conversation.

Deb: Thank you, Noah. The pleasure has been all mine, and I'm just so thrilled that Education Through Music wanted to spend some time today. I'm thrilled that you're reading the blueprint. Share it with folks. Get everybody else to read it too, the more..the more people who know about it, the more camaraderie I think we'll have in getting things done.