

ETM: The Podcast

Episode 10: What Makes for Great Music Programs?

TRANSCRIPT

Noah: You are listening to Education Through Music, the podcast. As always, I'm your host, Noah, and my guests today are Liz Guglielmo and Barbara Murray. Liz is the current director of music for the New York City Department of Education and Barbara is her predecessor. So between the two of them, we have nearly two decades of leadership in that particular role, and much more if you consider their time as teachers and administrators. So who better to bring in for a discussion about what it takes to build a successful music program in the city of New York. Now, without any further ado, Barbara, Liz, thanks so much for being here.

Liz Guglielmo: Thanks so much for having me today. Glad to be joining you.

Noah: So I guess we should probably start off with something of an introduction, not only of each of you as music educators, but also of what this role is that you have both had at one time Liz now and Barbara previously. What is the director of music for the New York City Department of Education?

Barbara Murray: I'm sure it has changed because it was changing daily when I, Barbara, had the job, but it's really a very comprehensive position. You are the voice, the eyes and the ears of every music teacher in the city. You are a champion for your art form, which is music. You are someone who helps principals and school leaders meet the goals and the aspirations that we all have for our kids, which is to receive an excellent music education and have experiences with the art form that are deep and enriching and lifelong. You are also the connector between the Department of Ed schools and New York City's cultural community, and that's because we live in the city that we live in. It's a very large piece of the job. The job has so many minute facets that one can only know when one is there and picking up the phone and yet another facet presents itself important, but there's so many variables involved that it would take a long time to really go through them. But by and large, you are the eyes and ears of the music community as it relates to music education for 1.9 million kids.

Liz Guglielmo: And just to further that thinking, you know I always kind of think about it in a couple of different parts. Like, I think about it in terms of like really being entrusted with serving our colleagues, so like really serving all of our, you know, music teacher colleagues and you know, as Barbara said, being eyes and ears to really know from the field, like what does everybody need to feel supported as a professional? You know, both in terms of their own personal professional capacity but also in terms of what's happening in their school. Lately I've been thinking in terms of students having a really successful, robust experience in their school that there needs to be a high level of skill and knowledge on the part of the teacher, both in terms of music itself and pedagogy. Another piece that's critical is a music supportive infrastructure at the school, and so I feel like there are those two elements that we're keeping an eye on in terms of supporting colleagues. You know, with professional learning and different types of resources that can really vary widely depending on what the needs are. And then, of

course, it's trying to really bring in special opportunities for teachers and for their students through cultural partners, because I feel like we can never forget in this role that here we are in the greatest city in the world, in the cultural capital of the world. The resources that are here in terms of music organizations, venues, the broad array of different music-making experiences that are available, I think is like something that you can get nowhere else, and forgive me if I'm being a proud New Yorker about that, but I really feel like that's a really unique piece of the role that we play. You know, being the director of music here in New York City.

Barbara Murray: We have our guide in New York and it's the blueprint for teaching and learning in music, and my predecessor, Nancy Shankman, started it in 2004, and then the second edition was released in 2008, and I think that this has been our, Liz, would you agree that when we say what do we want our students to know and be able to do in music, that the blueprint contains those steps? Those and our teachers have that at hand, and our principals, our school leaders have that at hand, and our parents as well. When we say this is what our kids should know and be able to do and experience in music, look at the blueprint. So I believe that that is a valuable tool, an invaluable tool really, that we should always talk about and put forth whenever possible

Liz Guglielmo: Yeah and I think that one of the unique features of it by design is that it's a framework, rather than a one size fits all prescriptive curriculum in recognition of the fact that, you know, from one musical setting to the next, from one school to the next, there's, you know, a lot of variability, different teacher strengths, different configurations of the program, and so I think that you know, coming back to the five strands, all the time is really setting the stage for a comprehensive music education. If somebody's really taking those five strands to take stock of what's happening, what students are experiencing, where there might be gaps. And, you know, one of the things that I have also always cherished about the blueprint from the beginning is the strand around community and cultural resources, because I just think that really reminds everybody to take full advantage of, like getting our students out into the world and connecting with all of the very rich opportunities and organizations and ensembles that you know you get in New York City specifically.

Noah: That flexibility, I think, is really what makes it such a useful tool, in that there's just such a wide variety of potentials in schools and not varying levels of potential, but different directions of potential in terms of like, what instruments does a school have, a class set of, what history of ensemble performance does a school have and which teacher is going to end up there and what have they done in the past? No matter what is at hand, you know, teacher, students, materials there's something that they can pull from the blueprint and a great deal of something. It can really be an outline for everything that they end up doing over the course of six through 12, K through 12, nine through 12, whatever the case may be.

Barbara Murray: Right, Regardless of whether there is a performing ensemble currently in place and if, in fact, that school is only at this point able to provide what we call core music, which the rest of the world calls general music, even in that class, music, literacy, making connections, community resources and careers in lifelong learning all of those strands can be

brought to bear and presented and taught in that core music class. It's a wonderful framework and we're very proud to have it.

Noah: I wonder if we could dig a little further into that question of what it means to be a teacher of music and a supporter of teachers of music in New York City, which is this place of a great deal of cultural capital. I wonder what that means in terms of recent developments and trends in music writ large, but also in music education.

Liz Guglielmo: I'd like to. If it's okay, I'd like to answer it about music education first. I think that's the first thing that I'm thinking about. Certainly, modern band and music production, I think, are two of our newer or more, you know, more newly developing areas of musical specialization. In music education, I think that, you know, in terms of technological advancements and trends, I think also just in popular culture and in education at large, I think that you know all of these things have set the groundwork for the addition of modern band as a new stream in terms of performing ensembles and music production and songwriting as well. I kind of think about songwriting and music production as two sides of the same coin, and at the same time, I also think about the diversification of repertoire and the types of ensembles that we offer to our students. Seems like such a simple phrase, but I one time, you know, heard somebody talking about the idea of, like there are many ways to be a musician, and so I think that as a profession, we've been really exploring that, exploring what are all the different ways you can be a musician and whether that's, you know, something that's your vocation or something that's having a musical life that's very rich, even if you're not a professional musician. You know, I think, about a choral organization that I had once worked with that talked about the full spectrum of the vocal arts and I think that if you kind of take that idea of the full spectrum of musicianship and look at our entire field like that's, the mission of you know, over the course of a K through 12, music education is really to provide that comprehensive music education and the broadest possible array of experiences. So we're really exploring access and meaning making in ways that I think are maybe more expansive than previously.

Barbara Murray: All of that is absolutely true, um, Liz I totally agree with you, and the thing that this position bears is to remember always that we represent the 900 plus music educators and so our ideas and our, our strengths and the strengths of our colleagues are how can I put this? They are brought to bear not simply because we want them to be seen or shared, but we have to do a fair amount of convincing and exploring and digging and seeing where the strengths are. I feel that all of those things that you said are absolutely our goal always, but we have to also we, both of us have had to bring our colleagues together to a place, or go along with them to a place, where they perhaps might see our vision for all of us. This vision may not always be shared, quite frankly, and the job of the director of music is to both be creative and think about these large areas and new ideas, these large areas and new ideas, but also it is our responsibility to be able to communicate that and say what do you think? Do you share this? How might we reach the scope? It's always a conversation, it's never. The director says it's always. How can we evolve together and serve kids? When I was there. I found it was always something that was in my mind. How can we have this as a communal conversation and goal, whatever it is?

Liz Guglielmo: Absolutely, and I feel like you know we really are helping guide everyone through a process of remaining a lifelong learner and helping everybody to really process, as, Barbara, as you said in your own way. What does that mean for me personally to be a lifelong learner? I think the key is to keep growing as a music teacher and then to figure out what are the ways that I'd like to keep growing in, what are the ways I need to keep growing in. I always think a lot about the idea of how to provide opportunities that help everybody to keep growing, keeping in mind that everybody's kind of in a different place. Not everybody's in all the same place in terms of their career, in terms of what their specialization is, in terms of just, you know, kind of what they're thinking about or what they feel passionate about. I think it's important to offer opportunities and professional learning that help teachers stay connected to like what are the major trends in our profession. Because once we leave college, let's say like we're finding it hard to, you know, find time to do professional reading or maybe to go to conferences or when we were not taking classes at a certain point in our career, then I feel like it's easy to kind of get out of touch with the trends in music education, and so I just think that even if, for whatever the reason, you're not able to get out to a conference, you haven't had the time to read. Whatever the case is, if you come to like citywide music professional learning, my hope is always that you will have a sense of both what's happening in a profession today. That'll be like food for thought for your own growth, and then also go home with some concrete tools. We're growing our toolbox and we're growing our mindset, both.

Noah: An image that's starting to take shape in my head as I'm listening to this conversation is when I was teaching, I always thought of myself as the lead learner, as opposed to sort of the you know, the, the teacher I. I think you can be, you can be both, but that that lead learner role was very important to me and what it seems to me from what I'm hearing is that the director of music is sort of like the lead learner, making information available to the teachers and also maybe being the person who did the homework and has some notes to share with the other lead learners who maybe didn't get around to doing their homework and being prepared to stay up on the trends and that sort of thing.

Barbara Murray: Yes, well said, Noah. That's exactly what the position really is. At the end of the day, you can't move forward unless you are learning. You won't move forward, I should say, unless you are constantly looking and saying where are the gaps? How might I improve? How can I help my teachers improve? How can we all get this, get to that goal that we all share?

Noah: I wonder if I could take a minute to get a timeline clear in my head. Now if I understand correctly I think Liz you became director of music in 2017. Is that right?

Liz Guglielmo: Yes, 2017.

Noah: And that was just as Barbara, you were retiring, is that right?

Barbara Murray: That's when I retired.

Noah: When did you become director of music, Barbara?

Barbara Murray: 2005.

Noah: That was a very interesting time in the 2005 to 2008 timeframe, a very interesting time to be in an administrative role within the Department of Education, at least from my sort of limited understanding of the history of the DOE. I wonder if you could share a little bit about the small school movement is really what I'm interested in hearing about and what impact that had on music programming in the Department of Education.

Barbara Murray: Quite frankly, the impact was not always positive. In fact, it was a challenge, because music teachers rely on groups. We like numbers, unlike a lot of others. I call us academic providers as well. We were, in a sense, caught short because all of a sudden, our 90 student ensembles were reduced to the students at hand in this now newly formed small school, and that 90 went to 20 in some cases, or fewer. It had a very sobering effect on music performance, I should say not what we call core music classes, but it was a challenge, and to have principals understand that programming was key is key to our success and our survival in terms of ensembles being in the seat at that time that was what was coming at me in terms of needing to help teachers deal with this new paradigm. I don't know if the repercussions are still ongoing Liz, you can speak to that better but when I left it had settled just to a great extent. But the impact is still felt, from what I can see, on our music performance.

Liz Guglielmo: When we think about systemic impact. I mean, I think, just because of the funding model, the smaller school has a smaller budget and that is still true. So I think in many instances what has happened is that if you went from, let's say, a large high school at one point that had large numbers of students, there could be larger ensembles and more ensemble offerings. Like it was not uncommon for many large high schools probably even most large high schools at a certain point to have band, chorus, orchestra, jazz band, marching band, you know, a variety of offerings. I think that when you have a smaller budget, it means that you know, not only for music programs, also, I think, for the overall offerings at the school, schools can only offer a certain number of programs or a certain number of specializations, if you want to call them that. So schools have been needing to make choices about which specializations that they need to offer or that they can offer, rather than being able to offer several, you know, based on a larger school model with a larger school budget. One of the things that I try to keep in mind is that, like, on one hand, it's important for us to know, like, where the reality is of the situation, but I also think it's important to not lose sight of the possibilities, because even though there have been, if you want to call them, unintended consequences for music education in some regards, in terms of, let's say, size of ensemble or you know how many different specializations can be offered, there can be coordination, and you know I'd love to see that take off more, I mean just to give one example the Grand St. campus in Brooklyn is a great example of a campus where there are three different schools and the schools have aligned their bell schedules and come to an agreement in terms of each school hiring a music teacher. So now you have this robust music department with really, really strong offerings. So it is possible. It's just that that kind of coordination and careful thought needs to happen. But that is possible and I guess I just never

like to lose sight of the fact that something can be possible because it can be something that can be grown.

Noah: I love that example too. It seems like that is sort of the promise of a highly functional small school setup where you've got common spaces, you've got common resources and you just have more administrative oversight, as opposed to, you know, a complete division of three separate schools within a campus.

Barbara Murray: And the common denominator there and all of the successful programs like that is leadership, a principal who believes that it can be done and should be done. And that's present, it has always been present in schools where, regardless of the faculty, music has thrived, because the principal has said it will thrive in the school that I lead and children come, they go, they graduate, they move, teachers do the same, but the music remains strong or the arts remain strong. And since we're talking specifically about music, those schools we know who they are. I believe the school leader is really integral or really, at the top of the list in terms of importance for maintaining music even in a small school setting.

Noah: This sort of leads into a question I was planning to ask, which is what are some of the variables that impact music programming, whether they be intentional or unintentional, and so it sounds like that is one of the major predictors of a highly successful music program is administrative support and buy-in. I'm wondering if there are some variables within that variable, so like how does administrative support and buy-in, how does that look? Or are there some other variables in addition to that one that are predictive of these highly successful music programs?

Liz Guglielmo: I mean, I think that the pieces have to be in place. All the pieces that are necessary have to be in place. The budget has to be in place, the space has to be in place, the staffing has to be in place, and so there are like a bunch of sub areas. I think that go along with those things and I think step one is caring about those things. But I think step one is, you know, caring about those things. But I think what goes hand in hand with that is at least someone in the building who knows how to do particularly the scheduling part. I think that in many cases, like I don't think that there are school leaders that are like anti-music, that don't want to have a great music program, I actually think there are probably many school leaders that would love to have that, but they don't necessarily. They're competing priorities, competing choices, a finite budget, and there may not always be the expertise in-house to know, like, what are the elements that you need to have and have in place to have a really thriving music program.

Barbara Murray: I couldn't agree more.

Noah: Yeah, these are sort of the nitty gritty details that they're not necessarily public facing, so they're not the exciting sort of marketable details but so important. Without a good schedule, nothing can really end up happening.

Barbara Murray: And Noah, the irony in that you've hit the nail on the head again. But the irony is that, in terms of marketing, music is the most often drawn upon marketing tool that any principal or school leader uses. It's the music kids who shine and who perform and the community comes to see and parents, you know, support outwardly. A strong music department is a phenomenal marketing tool. Every principal knows that. At the same time they are under competing pressures, as Liz said.

Liz Guglielmo: Yeah, I think that there are pressures that principals are. I mean, I think principals are under tremendous pressure in terms of academic performance metrics. I think there are more electives than ever, and so some of that becomes a conversation about. You know, what are we going to use these large spaces for? Are they going to be the band room, the chorus room, the robotics lab, a computer science space, Like? What are these spaces going to be used for? Or how are we using teaching power? How are we using budget? You know those are things that all enter into the picture. I think that we also can't forget about the impact that COVID has had on music programming during the pandemic, because I think we still are in a rebuilding phase and I think things are on their way up, but I still think that you know there are traditions, even you know, sixth grade is looking up to eighth grade, ensembles and so on, almost like rites of passage that were the cornerstones of the school community, that schools are rebuilding as we are still emerging out of the pandemic. On one hand, I'm always thinking about that we are still rebuilding and I always want to make sure that I'm taking that into account, being sensitive about that, in the work that we're doing. But I also am thinking that I've sseen some phenomenal school concerts and you know our city wide honors music festival was fantastic. I mean there were some really really strong performances that happened over the course of this last year where I didn't say, wow, well, it's like this because of the pandemic. I just felt like these performances were really excellent and so to me that means that it's not that everything is starting from scratch. There's been some more momentum that's helped people maybe move forward a little bit quicker. One thing that's a specific example of things that are really taking off and going in the right direction after the pandemic, the Susan E. Wagner High School Jazz Ensemble won second place in the country in the Essentially Ellington competition and they've entered that competition, I want to say, for decades, and this past year was the year that they won second in the nation. So the fact that a New York City high school could win second in the whole country in probably the most prestigious high school jazz competition in the United States, that's something I think that's truly remarkable coming out of a pandemic, but it's something that it gives me a lot of hope.

Noah: Yeah, absolutely A cause for celebration.

Barbara Murray: The celebration is well earned. And again, that thread is the educator. Who's in front of that ensemble? That ensemble is led by one of our finest music teachers. One of our finest music teachers. He is a strong, strong teacher, a strong musician, a strong music educator, and his presence remained throughout. And so we see the outcome of that. And I remember once I was at a meeting with Wynton Marsalis and somebody, somebody asked him what was the common denominator, what was needed to make music strong in New York City and in any other city, and he said a music teacher, a strong music teacher. Put all things aside,

close the door, and if you put a strong music teacher in front of those children, something will happen, something wonderful will happen. And we've seen that happen again and again and again in New York. We have wonderful music teachers in New York City. We need more.

Noah: Maybe that's a good transition to another question I have, which is what is the role of an organization like ETM in helping to pitch in and make this music education available?

Barbara Murray: The thing that I've always loved about ETM and I've been saying this since I first met or heard about ETM I love the emphasis on instruction because for me, that is the bottom line it is I mean, there are many other pieces to this to success. However, etm has always made it a point to place its music teachers in a position where they can succeed, and that is by giving them the tools, giving them the guidance, modeling, curriculum development, professional development all of those things that we know make it possible for a teacher to grow as a new teacher or a medium-experienced teacher or a veteran. Those things are critical, but ETM does this exceptionally well and I'm not sure that I know of many organizations nationally that have adopted its model. So I know that if a teacher has come through ETM's program, that person can be put in front of a classroom and I am pretty sure that they will be successful because of the resources that they've received and the assistance that they've received.

Liz Guglielmo: Yeah, I mean really to echo Barbara's words about the importance, and I guess also Wynton Marsalis' words, the importance of a music teacher and a strong music teacher. I mean, of course there are many as we talked about. There are many elements involved in success, but the heart and soul of music education is the music teacher in the classroom. There's nothing that replaces that.

Barbara Murray: Absolutely.

Liz Guglielmo: So a model that supports that music teacher and the environment that that music teacher is working in, that's setting up students for success.

Noah: Thank you both for spending this time with me this afternoon and for sharing your experience and your insight.

Liz Guglielmo: Thanks so much for having us.

Barbara Murray: And thank you to ETM for being such a wonderful partner.