

## **ETM: The Podcast**

### **Episode 7: Music Education is a Right – How to Advocate for Music Education with Naomi Fernandez**

#### **TRANSCRIPT**

**Naomi Fernandez:** One of the reasons that music is so imperative to be in our schools is that it adds a layer of community that connects us in a way that nothing else can. Music is a universal language. It's something that every language, every culture shares, and it's a way that we can learn about each other's differences that grows our empathy and compassion and interest in things that are different from ourselves, because it starts with that common language. And another reason that music was invaluable in my life and in so many lives is because we build friendships, we build community through music class and through ensembles, and it's something that goes way beyond the school. So this is something that outlives even the school. It's a legacy.

**Noah:** Hello and welcome back to Education Through Music, the podcast. As always, I'm your host, Noah, and joining me today is Naomi Fernandez. Naomi is the Associate Director of Curriculum and Professional Development at Education Through Music and, as you will soon hear, she is a staunch supporter of music education for all students, making her the perfect guest for today's episode on advocacy in music education. Naomi, thanks so much for being here.

**Naomi Fernandez:** Thanks so much for having me.

**Noah:** This is the first episode back after a month-long hiatus that took place over the course of getting ETM Notables started and over the course of a gala being produced, and now we're into the end of the year with formal observations. So there's a lot going on at ETM. But one thing that went on during that month-long hiatus was Music in Our Schools Month. So I'm really excited to talk to you about that today. But before we get into Music in Our Schools Month, I wonder if you could tell us a little bit about your background in music and music education.

**Naomi Fernandez:** Sure, I'd love to. Well, I grew up in a very musical family. My mother came from a musical family, and so music was a part of what we did normally at home and consumed outside of home regularly. I wanted to start piano lessons, I think around the age of 10, and I had a piano teacher for about six months. Unfortunately, my parents couldn't afford to continue, so I learned all of my right hand and none of my left hand and just continued on my own. Years later, my mom found her old clarinet from when she was in high school, and thus I got to join sixth grade band.

**Noah:** Great.

**Naomi Fernandez:** Had the most amazing band teacher named Scott Freeby no joke, look him up and I luckily started at the same time as another student and because we were later than the Beginner's Band, we were trying our hardest to catch up and we were somewhat competitive.

And it was because of Dustin that I became the clarinetist that I am today, because we went from Beginner's Band at our school and the next year there were like five bands at our school and we were in the top band in seventh grade. I decided I liked this music thing. It was something that was interesting and spoke to me. So in eighth grade I joined choir and just kept the music train going when I attended a private school, starting in high school, and at this school we had music tours. These were what we lived for all year long In the spring. We worked hard on our music all year so that we could go on these tours and travel around for about a week, performing all over the place and usually getting to do some fun stuff like roller coaster rides and other amusements. However, my senior year we had a brand new music teacher at this school and a month in, suddenly that teacher was gone and we didn't know why and it was difficult, it seemed, as they tried to find a new hire, to find somebody, and they couldn't. So they were breaking the news to us that basically, music was canceled for that year and we were really heartbroken, mainly about music tour, and I've always been a ham. So I got up as a joke and started waving my arms and my friends followed me and we played the music. And then I started looking up conducting patterns online and figuring it out and actually was the leader of the band for the rest of my senior year.

**Noah:** Fake it till you, make it.

**Naomi Fernandez:** That's right, I definitely was faking it. And what was great was we were connected to a college and a college professor came down, brought some of his college students music majors to fill out our band and we put on a concert. It was such an amazing experience for me to be conducting that and the college professor told me you need to be a music teacher. And I told him no way I'm going to study the migration patterns of orcas, because my heart had been set on being a marine biologist since I was about 12. And I had actually even adopted a whale and I mean I had a whale-themed room. It was big, it was my passion. And luckily, this guy knew what he was doing and he called me every week until I graduated high school and I came and checked out the music ed program at this college and the rest is history.

**Noah:** So that brings us to our main topic for this episode, which is music being in a classroom and a music classroom being in a school and more music being available to more students, and what it takes to advocate to make that the reality.

**Naomi Fernandez:** I think a lot of us get uncomfortable with the word advocacy because we feel like that means we're going to need to be somewhere with a sign that we created and marching in front of a lot of people. And some of us are ready for that and some of us we like to advocate in more background ways. And so I just want to start with the idea of advocacy being something that everybody does. The things that we love and the things that we're passionate about, we speak up about, and that's all we're meaning when we're talking about music education advocacy. How do we speak up for it? How do we represent it to a wider population? How do we show its importance to everyone that we interact with? And I think step one is, as a music teacher, building a strong program. It speaks volumes, without having to say anything, if you have a strong program where students are thriving, they're drawn, they're engaged, they're learning something, they're growing, they're building confidence, they're developing musical

skills, they're able to express themselves, they're developing fine motor and gross motor skills. These things start at a wave that continues out and ripples in advocacy for itself, so I think everyone can do that part.

**Noah:** So as a teacher providing the proof of concept that is needed in order for someone else to be out with the sign and to say hey look, this is working, that is in itself a piece of advocacy work.

**Naomi Fernandez:** Yeah we have to, you know music education isn't a product, and yet we always have something that represents us publicly and we can't deny that or ignore that. And you know, we have to not only represent like a performance, but we have to represent the process somehow to people. And maybe that's when you're giving a concert you're not only sharing music but you're sharing the process to get to that music and what that did for those students. So we have to be creative and find ways to highlight all of it.

**Noah:** What are some of the ways of highlighting process in that sort of final product style performance setting?

**Naomi Fernandez:** Sure, one thing that comes to my mind that I used to love to do with my bands was we used to do back in time moments. We would play music that we'd worked very hard for, but we would go back in time and we would pretend we were beginners again and play for our parents what it sounded like the first week and we'd play those songs and we'd say, oh, this used to be so difficult. And then we'd play it how we could play it now. This back in time was fun for my students and it was fun for the parents to see the growth between when their students first picked up an instrument to when they had come to fruition. Or maybe my general music classes were performing something and we talked about some of the musical elements in it that they had learned, and I would have a student or maybe some of the decoration was from student work on learning that concept. And then in my secondary levels it was like contests and it was showing the improvement through the contest season into our final concert, and parents saw that growth in each performance of the same pieces of music. So there's many different ways depending on what your program is. But you can find them.

**Noah:** Yeah, I'm thinking of that that flashback concept and how If you are as a teacher, if you're taking video from the first day to the last day, it would be possible to in even more tangible ways to show that process, especially if you have, like, a projector screen as part of the stage and that sort of thing, that could be a lot of fun.

**Naomi Fernandez:** That's the way you young hip technology teachers can do it, and so that's one of the advantages of the 21st century. Yes, I advocate for that all the time. I mean, that is literally going back in time and showing the literal progress, so that's perfect.

**Noah:** Right, the actual receipts.

**Naomi Fernandez:** That's right. Ours was just pretending, faking it till we made it.

**Noah:** Right, right. Well, there's something to be said for that too, especially in the field of performance. Something that happened very recently was Music in Our Schools Month, which is every March, and so I'm wondering if we can talk a little bit about maybe for a listener who's less familiar with Music in Our Schools Month what is it, what is it for, but then also what are some approaches that are appropriate for that month of more concentrated advocacy work?

**Naomi Fernandez:** Yeah, so Music in Our Schools Month actually started in 1973, and it was actually started here in New York. It was a statewide day of advocacy for music education programs and it's something that has grown now to be a month-long celebration in March every year that NAFME has adopted, and now they theme it every year and have activities and different things you can do to highlight what music education brings, the importance of music education and what's happening in our schools. Music in our schools month is not the only time that we're advocating, but it's a time to shine a spotlight and you know everybody deserves a spotlight at some time and especially music education. I just attended a luncheon, actually earlier this week, that featured or honored George Shirley, the first black man in the Army Chorus and one of the first black men in the Met Opera, and he kept saying over and over that why don't people understand that music was a part of the quadrivium? I didn't even know that word until he said it yesterday, but I looked it up the quadrivium. The quadrivium was secondary to the trivium, which was grammar, logic and rhetoric, and then the secondary line was arithmetic, geometry, music and astronomy and those were the seven liberal arts that you that basically from Plato through the Middle Ages said that you were an educated person. Those were the seven. Let me rephrase it those were the seven core subjects, and it's just mind-boggling to me that we've come so far to where music is an add-on, music is a privilege.

**Noah:** Music is a prep.

**Naomi Fernandez:** But music is a right and music is a right part of every education. How can you consider education whole if you're not including music? That's the question. That's the question that music in our schools asks every year. You don't have a whole education unless you have music in your school.

**Noah:** Right and I think you know, over the past I guess it's been about three generations since education got sort of turned on its head by international competition and the Cold War and that sort of thing and this idea that STEM is really all you need in order to protect a country from invasion, or something like that. But if you have an education system that is really just here for the purpose of national defense, then that's not very fun.

**Naomi Fernandez:** Well, and we know that STEAM is way better than STEM. We can STEAM ahead with the arts. You know we start to get into these debates like why include music education? And it becomes about all these different things like it impacts learning, it builds self-confidence, it helps discipline, it develops fine and gross motor skills, it improves language skills, increased IQ, the brain works harder when doing music because it's doing so many things

simultaneously, spatial, temporal skills and the big ticket winner, improved test scores. But really we should stop and say music should be there just for being musical.

**Noah:** Right. It has this intrinsic value that I don't think anybody nobody I know would argue with the intrinsic value of music, because I don't know of anybody who doesn't have some sort of relationship with music as the central pillar in their life, whether they are like my father doesn't play an instrument but he has listened to music in such a prolific way that he has his favorite conductors, he has his favorite orchestras for particular pieces that he's very fond of and that sort of thing with music, and I don't know anybody, even people who don't play an instrument or don't sing, still have this very strong relationship with music with no reason, you know no reason other than just the enjoyment of having music in their lives. So I don't know of another subject that is like that on such a widespread basis for so many different people.

**Naomi Fernandez:** Well, who experiences life without music? I mean, think about it. Even silent films would hire pianists to go to the theater live, to add to their production. It wasn't enough. They needed the music. Every culture, every language, every person values some type of music, some music making. Again, I'm going to go back to something George Shirley said. We start off singing as babies, and he described the development of speech from singing. It's not the development of singing from speech. We start out making long and short sounds, high and low pitches. Yeah, they might sound like crying or whining to some of us, but it's our only way to communicate. It's a part of who we are, and so nowhere else can you find yourself, like you can find yourself in being musical.

**Noah:** So I suspect at this point we're probably preaching to the choir for the average listener of the show, but I'm wondering if we can get into some specifics related to things that, if you're not a music teacher, for example, you might be able to engage with in order to be part of the advocacy effort for music education.

**Naomi Fernandez:** Yeah, so we can start with just simple as showing up for concerts at schools, supporting the students as they develop, making the school see that it's a valued part of the community by being there. Being present is probably one of the most impactful ways that you can advocate. Secondly, you can grab your little card and soapbox and go out to the streets and preach it. Thirdly, you could be on the board the school board or vote for the school board, or contribute presentations to the school board about what music has meant in your life, or in your children's lives or friends' lives, or in your community.

**Noah:** A lower level of oversight. You could attend PTA meetings or something of that nature.

**Naomi Fernandez:** Yeah, you know it really is finding ways to show up. I really I think that's probably the underlying how can you show up? How do you show up best? Maybe you show up best just by attending that concert. Maybe you show up best by getting out there and sharing a message passionately, and maybe you show up best by joining in that band or mentoring. Maybe you have an instrumental skill and you can loan that to the school and mentor those

students into their musicianship through singing or playing. But I think just asking yourself, how can I show up? Maybe you can support a nonprofit that puts music in our schools.

**Noah:** Right.

**Naomi Fernandez:** And let me talk about that, because music in our schools is more than just an add-on. I really believe that music in our schools means music being in our school day. That's when all students are present for the school day and that's what is the main source of education for that school, and we want to be a part of that. We don't want to be an add-on after school. Can we have those? That's a bonus, yes, but remember, we're talking about music as a right, which means it's a core subject and it's something that every student should have, and that's not going to happen if it's not there during the school day.

**Noah:** Once it is in the schedule and it is a piece of the puzzle that is sort of guaranteed by compliance measures and that sort of thing. That is, when you have your music program. After school can be taken away. The school schedule cannot.

**Naomi Fernandez:** And again after school doesn't serve the whole school.

**Noah:** Right.

**Naomi Fernandez:** And we believe that music education is a. I will preach this till the day I die that music education is a right and not a privilege. You know my parents. I have had times in my life where I have been a have and a have not, and I have experienced music education in both of those circumstances, luckily. But I went to college never having had a lesson on my clarinet. Only Beginner's Band at school was the only lesson I had and I felt intimidated because of that. I actually had to learn to retongue in college because I had been doing it wrong for years. But I overcame and I was still able to pursue that dream because I had music in a school and if not for that, then I wouldn't be a music teacher today, I wouldn't be here today, and it's just so much of my history. It's what I plan to do for my future, it's what I'm super passionate about. So I can't imagine that, and when I think about students being cheated of that, that really breaks my soul in a way that nothing else does.

**Noah:** Part of the reason this episode is coming out so late is because of the sheer amount of stuff that we had going on in the office and around the city at our different partner schools as a part of Music in Our Schools Month. So I wonder if we could talk a little bit about everything that went on over the course of this past. Well, really month and a half at this point. Really month and a half at this point.

**Naomi Fernandez:** Yeah, so we were trying to. You know, Music in Our Schools Month is a NAFME initiative and we didn't want to steal the glory from that, but we wanted to celebrate with them and we wanted to thank the over 60 partner schools that have chosen to partner with ETM this year and put music in their schools and some of the ways we did that was we had a couple

breakfasts with the bands and that's where our beginners bands do sort of an informal concert and perform for their parents and just kind of show their progress on their instruments.

**Noah:** And orchestras too. I'll make a plug for the orchestra at CS55. That's right.

**Naomi Fernandez:** Breakfast with the ensemble. Let me correct, stand corrected. And then another thing we did is we asked we wanted to kind of show ETM's presence across the five boroughs of New York City, and so we prepared specific lessons for each grade level, K to eight, and a songwriting contest for our high schools, and we asked our teachers to teach these lessons March 6th through the 10th. And this was really fun because it meant that any school you walked in, you were seeing ETM's same content with that grade level and we felt excited about that. Another thing we did is we sent a thank you toolkit to our principals with a banner that they could proudly hang and say I'm an ETM partner, Music is in my school and with some ETM swag. You know, so they can represent Other things. That went on was obviously our gala. Our gala was a big part of presenting what we do to the city and to supporters and stakeholders, and at our gala was a big part of presenting what we do to the city and to supporters and stakeholders. And at our gala we brought together four choirs from four different boroughs to make one big, huge choir ETM Choir.

**Noah:** Mega choir.

**Naomi Fernandez:** That's right, and they performed two songs and we had Noah on the bass and we had Adam on our other instructional supervisor, Adam on drums, and it was lovely to share music that way. We had Bucket Drums from Queens come out and open up the show and we had our modern band from All Hallows kind of close it out with a couple of rock songs, and so every genre of music, every age level and every borough was represented in some way.

**Noah:** Yeah, and I'll note that everybody you just mentioned has been on a previous episode of the ETM podcast. Adam was in episode two when we were talking with all the IS instructional supervisors. Alfredo and Joe were in episode, I think it was three or maybe four. It was the one about putting together a winter concert.

**Naomi Fernandez:** It was great to celebrate what they do. It wasn't. They didn't have to do anything different. They just did what they do. And it was nice to again shine that spotlight and say look what music in our schools is doing for these kids. The faces of the students are what matter to me most. Yes, do I want them to perform well? Yes, but what I'm looking at is what was that experience like for these kids to perform in the Ziegfeld Ballroom in Manhattan, New York City, and have this field trip after school, late at night, some of them who hadn't even been outside of their borough before, and so you know just these opportunities that music can expose them to again. This is why we wanted to celebrate music in our school's month.

**Noah:** Naomi, thanks so much for joining me and for sharing your story, as well as your insights on advocacy and Music in Our Schools Month.

**Naomi Fernandez:** Thank you so much for having me. Rock on.