



*How the sound of music  
woke one school district up  
to the value of the performing arts*

By William C. Skilling with Jerry Carstensen

# Arts Awakening

**E**mbarrassing. That was the only way to describe the joint band and choir concert on that fall evening in 1991 at Byron Center Middle School.

The concert, a combined event with high school students from Byron Center, Mich., involved around 40 students in grades seven through 12. Together, the middle school and high school had more than 700 students, and yet the choir had only 19 members—with just one male voice. Only 23 students were in the band.

I had just begun my job as principal at the middle school and was very disappointed at the group's small size. While the students' effort could not be questioned, they sang and played at about a sixth-grade level. Musically, the concert was disappointing, and I was appalled that our district did not value the arts more.

My opinion was not based on any personal musical training. I had no background in music and frankly considered the arts to be for kids who lacked athletic ability. But the following week, I mentioned the concert at an administrators' meeting and said how embarrassing it was that the performing arts program had slipped to such a low standard. I said I thought we should either eliminate the arts entirely or make the program exemplary.

The thought of an exemplary fine arts program in our district elicited laughter from everyone—except the superinten-

dent. The other administrators recognized the lack of support from the community and the staff at that time. But the superintendent thought it was a good idea and asked me to form a committee to develop an exemplary fine arts program.

When I replied that I knew nothing about the arts—my background was in sports, which I had played and coached—the superintendent said, "It's about time you learned."

And so I was put in charge of the entire K-12 fine arts program, a position I held for 11 years until I left the district in the summer of 2002. That one concert set off a chain of events that led me from ignorance to an appreciation of the arts as an integral element of a well-rounded education.

## **A change of attitude**

When I became principal of Byron Center High School (BCHS) the following summer, I started recruiting members to join the new Fine Arts Council. As part of my research, I interviewed students involved in the performing and visual art programs and talked with instructors at schools with exemplary programs. Through this process I learned about a whole world that I had previously ignored.

The students changed my heart and my attitude. When I saw their passion, I became determined to help create a new cultural awareness in our school district and community. I wanted to have exemplary programs in every area of our high school—excellence in academics, arts, and athletics.

The Fine Arts Council started with the goal of having an ex-



These student musicians are just two of the beneficiaries of a school district and community endeavor that brought a fine arts facility to Byron Center, Mich. The Van Singel Fine Arts Center includes gallery space as well as a performing arts theater.

ment for graduation. By the fall of 1994 we had hired three new teachers for art, choir and drama, and band.

The board, however, was skeptical about community support for the theater. A few members wanted it handled separately from a bond issue to build a new high school. As cochair of the bond campaign, I argued that the theater was necessary for a comprehensive education program and that the parents of fine arts

students would be disenfranchised otherwise. The theater would serve the broader community—including senior citizens, private school parents, and other community members—and give these groups reason to support the bond. The board agreed to put it on the referendum.

The Fine Arts Council, which was made up of influential people from the private sector who value the arts, helped build the momentum for our referendum, which passed in March 1995 by a 2-1 margin. We had enough money to build the arts center but not to equip it, so we had to find the money from private donations. We told potential partners that not only the school but the entire community would benefit from a new cultural center with a performing arts theater and art gallery.

Our approach was successful. For example, we wanted four grand pianos—one each for the stage, art gallery, choir room, and orchestra pit. I visited three local music stores to compare pianos, telling each we were going to buy three of the instruments but would like a fourth donated. I explained that the pianos would be the exclusive brand for our theater. We offered the winning bidder a full-page ad in every show program, plus a plaque in our art gallery recognizing their gift.

Keyboard World, which had the winning bid, was so impressed with our plans that the owner offered to donate two pianos, one conservatory 6-foot 1-inch grand piano for the art gallery and a 9-foot master grand piano for the stage.

With this store's offer in hand, I went to Byron Center State Bank and asked bank officials to consider buying the third piano. They said yes. Then I approached the main grocery store chain in our community, Family Fare Food Stores, which paired with Pepsico Inc. to purchase the fourth one. The names of these donors appear on every ticket, so they benefit from ongoing publicity. We received \$250,000 worth of pianos, and, as a bonus, Family Fare and Pepsico added a \$2,000 annual fine arts scholarship.

emplary arts program, and we turned to research to develop compelling arguments about why we should reach for that goal. Numerous studies show how arts involvement boosts student achievement in academic areas, reduces discipline problems, and gives nontraditional or at-risk students a niche to explore their own creativity and be successful.

A stronger curriculum was only one piece of the puzzle, however. We also needed excellent teachers, outstanding facilities, and superior equipment. We decided to aim high and raise funds for a professional-scale performing arts theater that would serve as the cornerstone of a regional fine arts academy. If we were thinking big about the arts, why not think really big?

When we compared our goal to the status quo, of course, we found a huge gap in resources, equipment, and dollars. We realized we would have to make up that gap.

### **Compelling arguments**

Next we focused our efforts on raising community awareness, because parents would be the key to making the program succeed. Concerned parents care about the quality of their children's education. If you can give them compelling reasons for action, they will join your efforts and help build momentum.

Cultural literacy alone is not a compelling enough reason to support the arts anymore. School board members and the public are concerned about whether graduates will be prepared to enter the workforce or further their education. So I focused on the benefits of a sound arts education, citing a Michigan Council for Arts and Cultural Affairs report that found a background in the arts to be a common denominator among highly successful corporate leaders.

Successful leaders are visionary, creative people, and the arts help foster this creativity, the study says. If we want to educate tomorrow's leaders, the arts are an important foundation. Our school board agreed and made fine arts credit a require-

## Providing the best

In designing the facility, we needed advice from professional theater experts—including consultants and manufacturers—rather than relying solely on school architects. One of the biggest equipment purchases in a performing arts theater is an acoustical shell, which helps transform theatrical space into a concert venue by sealing off the stage area from the back of the house and the fly loft. This creates one large acoustical space so sound created onstage is projected to the audience.

Because of the size and complexity of the acoustical shell, and the fact it must be integrated with other theatrical equipment like rigging, it was wise to involve the shell manufacturer during the project's design phase. Typical professional-quality shells can cost \$100,000 or more, but schools can save money by buying directly from the manufacturer if the shell is bid separately.

One couple, Harvey and Ereveen Gainey, donated the entire amount to fund the acoustical shell, and our art gallery—Gainey Gallery—was named in their honor. Willard Van Singel donated the land for the new high school and fine arts center, which was named for him.

Acoustics were paramount from the earliest planning stages, and it is gratifying that Van Singel Fine Arts Center has received so many compliments for its outstanding acoustics. Some professional musicians have even compared it to Carnegie Hall. The 6,000-square-foot stage and 798-seat house are large enough to stage Broadway-style theater productions, with state-of-the-art technological features.

## Continuing efforts

The Van Singel Fine Arts Council raises money on an ongoing basis by offering season or performance sponsorships and program advertising. In our first year, we raised more than \$500,000. Since the theater opened in November 1998, we have raised more than \$2.5 million. Also, more than 8,000 tickets have been given away to low-income families and students to attend professional shows, and \$10,000 in scholarships has been awarded for higher education.

We started a foundation two years ago to build an endowment that would underwrite tuition for students who may need financial assistance to attend the planned Van Singel Fine Arts Academy. The tuition will cover the cost of educating students during the summer months and will support the required private tutors. In addition, the endowment will help provide scholarships for students who pursue a fine arts degree in college.

Acceptance into the academy will be based on audition or portfolio review. We want to accept students based on ability, motivation, and aspiration. If lack of money is a barrier, we want to remove it.

Today arts programs at BCHS—almost nonexistent 10 years ago—are flourishing. During the 2001-02 school year, 85 percent of the student body was involved in fine arts. Three full-time visual arts faculty offered 13 different art classes, which were full. Districtwide, more than 350 students took classes in

the visual arts, including video production.

Music participation also climbed. The school now has five choirs, concert, marching, and jazz bands, and an orchestra, all taught by three full-time music faculty. Our fifth-grade orchestra program started five years ago, so those students were freshmen last year, and we now have 38 students enrolled at the high school. Eighty students—10 percent of student body—were involved in the last school musical. Our music groups have won top honors at state and national competitions, and our women's chorus was invited to perform at Carnegie Hall.

As sweet as the music onstage and as compelling as the center-stage drama are the academic results in the classroom. Average ACT scores have gone up for five consecutive years, reaching 23.8 last year, and we've also increased our state achievement test scores. BCHS was named a National Blue Ribbon School of Excellence in 2000 and was one of only a dozen schools in the nation to receive an award from the National Council on Teacher Quality.

At BCHS and throughout the district, it has become cool to be involved in the arts. One of our star athletes auditioned for a part in *My Fair Lady* in the winter of 2001 and later described the experience as "the best thing I did in high school."

Arts programs have been strengthened throughout the district, which now has two full-time elementary school art teachers and a middle school art teacher for grades seven and eight. The choir program begins in grades three and four with a morning-only choir. The full orchestra and choir programs encompass grades five to 12, and band includes grades six to 12.

Every professional show booked at the Van Singel Fine Arts Center has an educational component written into the contract, requiring the performers to work with students in a lecture, demonstration, or class setting. Students from neighboring schools are invited to attend these workshops, and distance-learning technology includes others.

The Van Singel Fine Arts Center has been so successful that plans are under way to design and pay for a black-box theater, with additional space for a dance studio and more performance and visual art classrooms. The Van Singel has built up a healthy fund balance and will become self-sufficient in a few more years.

Some people say building this facility was extravagant, but I wish we could have done even more. The results—artistically and academically—have exceeded expectations, while the benefits to students and the community continue to be enjoyed. We've come a long way from that first embarrassing concert.

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