

M.M.S.D. STRINGS Analysis

Comments/Additions to MMSD Analysis –Summary Points

The April 21, 2004 MMSD Analysis of Grade 4 & 5 Elementary Strings made assertions that appear to be incomplete and in some instances incorrect. The analysis neglected to include the following key points:

- **Enrollment Rising** - Since the year 1993, district 4th grade enrollment has **decreased** by **10%**. During that same period, 4th grade strings enrollment has **increased** by **21%**. Since the 2001-2002 school year **minority and low income participation has increased**. Approximately 1,600 children elect the curriculum in Grades 4 and 5.
- **Cost-Effective** - Private lessons and instrument rental would cost more than \$1,500 per academic year for a low-income family. The **cost to the district is \$285 per student**.
- **Revenue** - The elementary strings program **recoups** a percentage of its costs by assessing rental fees for district-owned instruments. These rental fees cover 100% of the budget for new instrument purchase and repairs for elementary strings. The strings curriculum provides more than **400 instrument grants to low-income students** at no incremental cost to the District.
- **Academic Curriculum** - The elementary strings program is an **academic, curriculum-based program** with its own learning standards and benchmarks that were established and adopted by the M.M.S.D. Board of Education as part of the **K-12 Music Education Curriculum, which is required by the WI Administrative Code**.

April 26, 2004

To Members of the Madison School Board

As a concerned parent, I have kept close tabs on the budget, and I am well aware of the budget challenges facing the District. I also believe in a fair and equitable budget process that is clear and understandable to the public.

I have reviewed the budget question #4 – Examine the costs of 4th and 5th Grade Strings that was sent to School Board members last Thursday, and I am concerned about its content and I am troubled by the tone and timing of the document as well. This is a serious curriculum issue this late into the budget process. Why did it take one month for the administration to inform the Board of the cost of the elementary portion of the instrumental music education curriculum? Couldn't this have been done in within a week of the request so that the information could have been released publicly as soon as possible? I do not understand why someone with no curriculum experience with the District's program was asked to write up the analysis? Who's checking curriculum accuracy?

The document's tone is negative and unlike any of the other write-ups the School Board has received. A cynical person might suspect this is a set up to eliminate the elementary strings curriculum.. That tactic would be a disservice to the community, especially the children who participate in this program, and would further erode our confidence in what you're presenting and what you're asking of us.

How long do string supporters have to put up with negative information being shared with the School Board? I have been asking all year long about forming a committee to address any issues re elementary strings. Carol Carstensen has asked. I was told we're not looking at that now and the Supt. specifically told Carol that he did not want any public input now – if not now, then when. Furthermore, why was the fine arts curriculum professional not directed to work on this curriculum issue, if needed, during the past two years? I also asked the Fine Arts Coordinator during the past two years the same question as I asked Carol Carstensen, and he told me that senior administration would let him know when to organize a committee with public members – he's still waiting to hear. Troubling.

I. Questions About the Calculations

A. Numerical

- a. *Cost of the Program / Student Participant –*
 - i. FTE Allocation - The analyst did not adjust the FTE allocation. Not all schools' information was collected. The total number of FTEs were used (9.5). This number used should have been proportioned for the FTE (9 FTE) and total program cost for 9 FTE would be \$518,932.

ii. The program was staffed and costed based on the September enrollment in the program. The program cost per student using 1921 students and a budget of \$547,762 is \$285/student. This should be the starting point for starting the discussion of a fee.

b. *Class Trend* – Elementary strings are the first two years of the District’s instrumental curriculum. Looking only at the strings numbers is not the entire picture. You need to look at the number of string students in Grades 5, then total instrumental in Grade 6-12. This would show an increase in instrumental participation from Grade 5 to Grade 6.

B. **Curriculum** – This document was not prepared by a curriculum professional familiar with the MMSD’s Board approved music education academic curriculum and the curriculum errors reflect this. This document was by a budget. The Fine Arts Coordinator did not sign off on the final document nor did he have any part in writing the document. Some comments on the analysis.

a. *Administrative Code* – A key requirement of the Administrative Code as it relates to music education is that there is in place a **Board approved sequentially developmental curriculum**. MMSD has in place Board approved Music Education curriculum for instrumental music that begins in Grade 4.

My questions for the Board are what are the written policies and procedures for developing, evaluating and changing curriculum. What process was followed regarding the music education curriculum during the past year? Who was involved?

C. **Outdated Information** – The written background information refers to studies done in previous years but does not reference the working group that met in February 2004 to discuss these exact issues and came to recommendations that would be workable. This group involved principals, music and string teachers, the Fine Arts Coordinator, the Lead Elementary School principal and a facilitator

D. **Out of Context and Unsupported Comments** – statements made without backup.

a. The analysis fails to note positively that minority and low income participation in the strings program has increased over time. The document does point out that students can get the same service privately for \$1500 per academic year (that number excludes instrument rental), which I believe might be difficult, if not impossible for low income students.

Further, the growth in this program for low income and minority students has been enormous over the past decade. District gives out more than 400

instrument grants to low-income students each year at no incremental cost to the District – this was not described in the District’s analysis. This is a significant benefit of the current program design.

- b. The analysis points out that the reduction of \$500,000+ is 5+% of the cut. In no other presentation does the Admin. say this. Did you know that cutting extracurricular sports equals 20% of the revenue gap or that a \$2 million cut in the admin. budget (13%) equals 20% of the revenue gap.
- c. The Administration has no information to support that strings has negatively affected children’s performance. We do know that both teachers AND parents sign off on participation in strings, which is designed to keep students out of the program who are not ready.
- d. General music and strings are higher than required by DPI. Our district is above DPI requirements in many academic areas. Is this an existing Board policy statement – only curriculum DPI requires? If so, why don’t we have DPI develop our curriculum, all the state’s curriculum.

Curriculum assessment is necessary – we don’t have to offer more than one foreign language, extracurricular sports, advanced classes, etc. Are you saying that we will only fund what DPI says we must and we are no longer going to review curriculum?

- e. Where is the demographic information for all the cut proposals that the district received? I saw none included with the extracurricular sports information. Why is this information included only when discussing elementary strings?
- f. Where is the cost/student for all curricula and programs?

II. Equity in Decisionmaking

Saying that a fee of \$493.50 would be needed to cover the cost of elementary strings is not only inaccurate but is grossly unfair. No other fee covers anywhere near the 100% of the costs – extracurricular sports, textbooks, for example. We need the Board to ensure that a fair process is being used to make decisions. If decisions appear to be made in an arbitrary, or in a worst case, **vindictive manner** the community will not support the School Board. Following are some recommended steps to consider in a decisionmaking process – questions for the Board to ask the Superintendent.

1. Does the District have a policy in place regarding cuts to academic curriculum? Does the Board have a policy? What is that policy? Where can I find that policy? If a policy exists what criteria are in place for making these kinds of decisions?
2. What process does the board expect the Administration to follow before cuts are recommended?

3. Does the Board know the cost of a curriculum, service, etc., before deciding on how much needs to be covered by fees? Is this applied equitably?
4. Does the Board know the curriculum/service results?
5. Has the Board discussed and decided how much they can afford to pay? How can the Board ensure an equitable process?
6. In all cases, I would hope that the Board would expect to see the professionals carrying out the policies of the School Board, with the Administration using the appropriate professionals given an issue/question.

III. Next Steps

Lastly, I would like to know if any of you are planning to offer elementary strings as an amendment to the Budget cuts. I believe parents and the community need to know this now, because we are running out of time and this is a major issue late in the budget process – especially considering there has been no preparation done during the past year. There is only one more public hearing. The children are saying they want to be heard.

Further, before you discuss this issue further I hope that you ask that staff review the comments in this letter and make changes as appropriate to their analysis.

Nothing has changed for the last two years. In light of our dire financial situation, no action was taken to address if any steps need to be taken to assess the music education curriculum – to explore options. The Supt. directed the Fine Arts Coordinator to spend his time this year holding a workshop with principals and teachers to address issues with the delivery mechanism. That is not an indication to the public that the program will be cut.

How long do we have to wait? Our kids deserve more responsible actions from the organization's leaders – let's not make a bad situation worse. And let's be equitable and work together. You need our support, and we need your leadership.

Barbara M. Schrank, Ph.D.
April 26, 2004