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Equity Statement

If Not Now, When? If Not Us, Who?

Think for a moment about the continuity and persistence of a sphere. Its strength is that it is impermeable – there is no apparent way in or out. It is continuous and completely formed. Its strength, however, is also its weakness – there is no way in and no way out. This sphere, the continuity of music teaching and learning in the United States that has been overseen, guarded, and shepherded by the MSNC, then the MENC, and now NAFME, has been strong in its deliberate approach to systematic instruction for the good of children. It has persisted and prevailed through depressions, wars, and civil unrest. But its evolution towards equity, even with the best of intentions by its members, past and present, has been slow to meet the needs of all – not just all children but of all people from birth and early childhood through the aging adult. Our sphere has been resistant and sometimes inflexible.

As we look at our past, it is clear that we have been perpetrators of the persistence of the sphere as a closed system of belonging. It is important to note that this is generalized and that there are individuals who represent NAFME and state MEAs, as well as various schools and districts across the country who are doing their level best to shift understanding, bring about awareness, and facilitate revision in thinking and curricula in an effort to bring about equity in our profession. We are an enormous and an enormously diverse country. Small pockets of individual work that engages a handful of teachers at a time, local and regional “good trouble”, as well as the bubbling of discourse that is readily accessible through various manner of social media are fertilizing patches of understanding, nudging people from complacency into consciousness, and creating a perfect environment for self-examination. This germination is being furthered by recent actions of NAFME including a series of town hall meetings that provide an open and safe forum for discussion, and a large repository of resources for diversity, equity, inclusion and access. The task of bringing about equity in music education, the task in which we are currently engaged, cannot be completed overnight and nor can it be accomplished with only a few strong hearts, hands and minds. Beginning with the Cook Ross study which launched NAFME leaders on a path of transformation, we find ourselves at a pivotal moment in time; charged by social awareness and by a motivated leadership and membership who are committed to doing the intense and difficult work that lies in front of us. We have momentum. There can be no rests in this dynamic symphony - not yet. Focusing on the words of President Mackie Spradley, “I am NAFME, You are NAFME, We are NAFME.” It is a mantra that, by other words, has been asserted for decades: we must have no doors or walls that divide. We must pledge to celebrate cultures without appropriation, provide instruction that is accessible to all regardless of ability, ensure that no one is disenfranchised and leave no one behind.

If we held a mirror to MENC in the past, who would it have reflected? Who would we see? Was it as reflective of **all of us** as it should have been? Today, if we hold the same mirror to NAFME, would the picture be different? I would suggest that it is gradually changing, like a ship turning

at sea – slowly and incrementally. But, as data reflect, changes in the youth population are changing rapidly and show a very different picture compared to the workforce who teaches them. According to the PBS Newshour¹, between 2020 and 2030, the US population will go from about 331 million to 350 million. The percentage of White people will drop from 60% of the population to about 56%. Growth in the Hispanic population will rise from 18.7% to 21.1%. The percentage of Black and Asian-Americans will also have grown, although not as much. And by 2045, it is expected that the White population will become a minority. But probably most important to NAFME is this: “...on the first day of 2020, Whites under age 18 were **already in the minority** [emphasis mine]. Among all the young people now in the U.S., there are more minority young people than there are White young people...Hispanics and the other racial minorities will be the country’s main demographic engine of population change in future years; this is the most significant demographic change Americans will see [between 2020 and 2030]”. And while our student population is rich with diversity, our music teacher candidates and the curriculum we teach remain static and predominantly white².

As we who embrace equity as the ONLY way of existence, we must take into account what this means. Entrance to the profession, breaking through the persistent sphere that harbors the closed system of belonging, includes assurances of equitable entrance for **anyone** who would choose to embark on this journey. Currently, in the vast majority of music teacher education programs, entrance is tightly protected to identify only the “right” prospective students. Still clinging to an existence that was based on practices with roots in the white, Eurocentric conservatory, auditions for admission to music education programs are often used to identify those who would be best bets for the population of the more traditional ensembles: choirs, orchestras, and bands. And while college admissions generally encompass any number of other factors (e.g., high school academic record, writing skills, college entrance examinations), passing an audition often lies at the heart of whether or not a student will be granted entrance into a program. The challenge for many young people is often financial, limiting access to the resources that would help them to prepare themselves for the audition process, through tutoring, private instruction and the like. Some present as naturally gifted teachers who may not have had opportunities to study privately in order to develop skills to pass an audition. We close the door on these potential teachers. Some are extraordinarily musical in ways that fall outside of the typical skills necessary for successful participation in the traditional ensembles. These potential teachers may be highly proficient electro house music artists, excellent banjo players, accomplished diatonic Zydeco accordionists, or outstanding performers of Afrobashment or Tejano music. We close the door on these potential teachers, as well, because of our impermeable sphere – only those with a white Eurocentric background in playing or singing the “right” repertoire need apply. And while we continue to close doors, our population

¹ <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/nation/3-ways-that-the-u-s-population-will-change-over-the-next-decade>

² Elpus, K. (2015). Music Teacher Licensure Candidates in the United States: A Demographic Profile and Analysis of Licensure Examination Scores. *Journal of Research in Music Education*, 63(3), 314–335. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022429415602470>

of young people becomes ever more like an artist's palette, alive with many unique colors, considerable cultural blending, and differentiated abilities.

This is not an either-or situation, but a both-and. We love and should embrace our long-established and time-honored music ensembles. For many of us, they are the very reason for our career choice. But for too long we have held on to a narrow view of what music education should mean. We have been a closed society and it is past time to open our views and, in so doing, open the profession to more. We cannot stop with words; words must lead to action. We must be the force that helps to identify those marginalized young people who have what it takes to be effective music educators and can be strong role models for other children in marginalized populations. We must dare to advance an agenda of reflection and revision in our music teacher preparation curricula nationwide. In so doing, we will necessarily recast ideas about the criteria for prospective music education majors. This will require bravery and honesty among music teacher educators to revise curriculum and speak openly with colleagues in supporting areas such as music theory, history, and applied studies, to share our vision with them to make music teaching and music teachers better for all. We must continue to examine what has been held historically as *the* musical canon, the content of our singing and playing for decades. To paraphrase composer, educator, and entrepreneur Allyssa Jones, it all begins with the repertoire. The music we are taught is a factor in who we are and how we identify ourselves. In the repertoire, we must recognize that which has been promoted and systematically propelled through blissful ignorance at best and purposeful racism at worst. We must recognize and eradicate witting and unwitting censorship through exclusion. And we must, individually and as a profession, take the bold path that turns away from the misguided and destructive route of white supremacy, to revise the canon, to remove barriers, and to firmly and without equivocation assert our belief that we must give voice to those who have been so wrongly held voiceless for so long.

This is the hard and necessary work that is being undertaken with our current NAFME leadership, steered by Mackie Spradley, and the next NAFME administration will need to rise up and carry on. These issues have urgency; the stakes are too high for us to wait until tomorrow or until someone else comes along to fix things. We are all called to serve, the charge is for all of us. And so, I ask: If not now, when? If not us, who?