



Candidates for 2026–2028 NAfME National President-Elect Patrick K. Freer and Judy Bush answered questions at the 2025 NAfME National Leadership Assembly in June 2025.

Here is transcript, including the questions the candidates answered.

Moderated Question and Answer Session transcript

1. The conceptual framework of NAfME's strategic plan highlights the importance of passion, lifelong learning, and a commitment to music education. Can you share a personal story or experience that shaped your values as a music educator and leader? How has this experience influenced your personal vision as a leader in NAfME, as well as your approach to serving our diverse membership and collaboration with the state MEAs?

Patrick K. Freer - I was the quintessential child singer. I sang every way that I could. I sang in church. I sang going down the street. I sang on Friday mornings in bring-in music to school day. I had a backup group of singers who sang with me. You know, they kind of wish they'd like me to sing. But when I got to fourth grade, my voice changed early. My teacher didn't know what to do with me. And she placed me in the back row of the choir and had me mouth for words. Now, standing on the back row of the choir, it's not for me, nor was mouthing words. And I realized she didn't know what to do. I didn't know what to do. And so I quit. So I was told I couldn't sing. It wasn't until I got to college, met a mentor who was a fantastic person, Ben Brown at Bozini College, who helped me figure out what I could do with my voice, rejoined the choir, and I was able to sing. And I became really interested in, well, what didn't that teacher know? What do I need to know about my voice, and how could I help future teachers through that process? That inspired me to become a teacher of singing and choral music for students who were like me, who were marginalized from that experience because of the voice change. That meant I needed to do research. That meant I needed to go to the library back when we did that thing, and I would find out what teachers needed to know about a voice so that they could help students like me. And now that's what I do. I help those teachers, but more importantly, I have spent my life traveling around the world talking to boys about their experiences as singers, and then drawing from that what those implications are for pedagogy, so that we can turn this issue away from a culture of problem of the changing voice, and work toward an opportunity of how can we keep these kids singing if not in schools and into their lives. Thank you.

Judy Bush: To make a long story short, I've been singing since I could walk. My dad had music in the house all the time. I ended up getting involved in band because he wanted me to be in that stage with him. And so that didn't happen, but marching band did. And my teacher in marching band was extraordinary. And he really got me excited about wanting to teach. And the big thing about wanting to teach was I wanted kids to experience the same feeling, the same joy of working with others and accomplishing

things that he had given to me. And so what I've tried to do in my 30 plus year career is just to get kids excited about making music together. And I hope we can do that in other ways.

2. Describe what you believe are the critical issues in music education that require a clear, unified national direction. As president, how would you navigate the balance of providing clear, unified national direction on critical issues in music education and empowering state affiliates to develop their own approaches?

Judy Bush: The first steps already happened. When the classes were filled, like, when they made music a subject, that was the first big step. But I kind of feel like that got lost there and we're not really taking that and drawing somewhere really important with that. You know, we have administrators who have no idea that that was part of the bill and that it is considered to be part of the curriculum for the child. I think if we could do more emphasis on making that information available and get it down the pipeline a little more, so it's like the state government, school districts, principals, that kind of thing, so that teachers could see that others are seeing this. I think it's difficult for teachers to be able to be that voice sometimes because they're pushy or they're all concerned about their program or saving their job or whatever it is. And we know that the importance of having music in every school district, and I think, child's life, it's just critical. We've got kids who wouldn't succeed otherwise if it weren't for the arts and for music, and so if we as an organization could make more concentrated effort to talk to those people in power and make them understand using research that we have to let them know that this is why all kids have to have music, I think that would be great.

Patrick K. Freer: Thank you. Judy and Adrian have spoken very clearly to a couple of the current critical issues in music education, but music education primarily is that which occurs in the classroom, in a relationship between the teacher and the students, and it is then the job of the school district and the support staff within that district, then the state affiliates, even the regional affiliates within each state, the state leadership, and then the school district. Then the regions and division leadership, and then the national. So with each step, we become a little bit more removed from the classroom, but in a way, we become more influential, because it's our job to take what is happening in the national community, figure out what we can do about it from a policy standpoint, and then translate that down to what does it mean to impact the teacher in the classroom. The teachers in the classroom are feeling pressure that I'm not sure they yet know what to do with, and that's our job is to be that translator and facilitator. Thank you.

3. NAFME's strategic plan emphasizes building coalitions and grassroots advocacy to ensure equitable access to music education. How can NAFME strengthen advocacy efforts at the local, state, and national levels? What steps would you take to expand the reach and impact of the association's advocacy initiatives?

Patrick K. Freer: So speaking of that diversity, we also have diversity that occurs just in what we deal with in our daily basis in our classrooms. For instance, in my state, in my situation, I'm not allowed to teach some of the concepts and use some of the words that my colleagues in other states are allowed to. And that, so what that means is that

the policies are impacting different members of our community in different ways. I applaud NAFME for its relatively recent efforts to expand the advocacy and materials and approaches that are available freely on the website and in other forums to match the diversity of situations that teachers find themselves to be in. I think an expansion of that is critical as we look to then figure out, well what does equity look like in this situation, what does diversity look like in this situation, how does inclusion work in my classroom, and those may all be different situations that need different approaches for advocacy and support. Thank you.

Judy Bush: You know as a general music teacher you have every title, and in my lifetime I've taught children with all abilities or disabilities from different cultures, different genders, different 'you-name-it,' I've had that opportunity. But the problem is that they start to go through school, we get to middle school, we get to high school, and suddenly there's that separation, well you know the standards, we want more quality in what we're doing for our students. We unintentionally, I think leave these kids out who really did great things in elementary school, but now because maybe they have a physical disability and they don't know how to see other kids, or a physical disability where they can't do marking or whatever, and so, and it's not just that, but having kids who don't have two parents in the home at night and they can't do after school, they take care of their sibling, or there's so many things that affect these kids that, you know, we're so in the pursuit of excellence that sometimes we leave the kids out of the equation.

4. Given NAFME's commitment to equity as a keystone of its strategic plan, how will you ensure that the association continues to advance equity and access in music education, particularly in light of evolving federal positions on DEI, while simultaneously preserving NAFME's future ability to serve members.

Patrick K. Freer: In mid-2025 words like diversity equity and inclusion are become associated with division rather than unity. If by 2028 when I become president, if by then the unifying messages of these definitions haven't been reclaimed then we need to use phraseology that unambiguously speaks enough to convey the philosophical tones that we want. We might consider belongingness, authenticity, whole self, contributions, connections, things like that as starting points. We might begin, as others have stated, by asking questions such as, what is it that we are hoping to, or wanting to include? And in what ways can we bring all of these into the experience of learning about music? We've talked about these sorts of things in the past, most recently, I think, and most effectively with the House Rights Symposium in 1999, and then renewed and revisited twenty years later, I use that framework in my classroom, and others, which takes a view that talks about all of these issues, by using sometimes different words that weren't of in-consciousness in 1999. So reframing what we do, in this sense, will require us to ask difficult questions, perhaps of intent. What would be the intent? Using the words of the English language to identify instances where we might unintentionally

invite misinterpretation or simplification. This examination could allow us to uncover even more effectively what we do.

Judy Bush: I think we start off, first of all, in understanding that DEI is more than an acronym. I think we use it so much that we know some people don't really know what it means and other people just throw everything in this kitchen sink under DEI. And I think we have to work on making it a lifestyle, a mindset, a habit of those things that we do for others and into our service in terms of leadership and our service to our students. That's why I'm so excited about the possible, we can take the DEI and Equity Committee and really help them to become that educational arm. What is DEI? How can I articulate that? How can I bring that to life with my students, to the people I work with, and not always rely on just the acronym?

5. Delivering professional development through online or virtual methods, as well as through our journals and magazine, has continued to be an effective method of supporting NAFME members in recent years. Recognizing the importance of responsive, timely, and relevant professional development for members, what do you see as the top priorities for professional learning, and how would you lead NAFME in reviewing and promoting our professional learning resources - particularly to those who may not realize what exists for them.

Judy Bush: First of all, for those of us who have not been in the classroom for a while, we've got to re-immersing ourselves, in what it is to be in a classroom. And it doesn't take long to do that. I stepped out of the classroom for two years after the pandemic, and then I went back to the classroom in a Title I school because I wanted to coach teachers who were in Title I schools, and it was astounding how different a lot of things had become different in those two years. So if you've been out of the classroom for a while, I think that's the first thing you do, to know exactly what our teachers need because what you think they need and what they really need may be two entirely different things. And so it's important for us to get into the classroom to really experience what our teachers are experiencing. But I see our professional development committee, I think they're working hard to get the best national teachers and keeping track of current trends. They're trying to find the best in our field so they're able to deliver the content. I don't have a problem with most of the things that we're doing for our professional development committee. I do have a little problem that I think we can solve readily is when we offer these things. And it feels haphazard. You know, I'm thinking of the teacher's schedule. I would never put anything on a Monday night because they'll forget it. I would never put anything on a Wednesday because a lot of our musicians are teaching church that or are doing church music things as well. I would just put on a Friday because that's a crash day. Tuesdays and Thursdays are the days when we offer things for teachers because they're a teacher. And I don't think that we think of that, and I don't think we think of the time how tired we are or meetings after school. So I think looking at professional development in terms of when we provide it is going to be the most important thing.

Patrick K. Freer: So one of the things that I hear most frequently is about professional development for mid-career teachers. The teachers who are beyond the first five years,

but maybe aren't yet senior teachers in the top ten years. These are teachers who need support for their musical skills that they maybe haven't exercised very much while learning the ropes of being a young teacher. And I would encourage us to focus somewhat on the mid-level, mid-career teacher as professional development. And time to develop some workshops especially for them. But the professional development, I think, begins with devaluing the professional development niche which would begin with mentoring efforts that I spoke of earlier, the early career teachers. The challenge, though, is getting those resources in front of eyeballs. And so I would encourage NAFME to, if not already present, to hire a consultant or a staff member who has the expertise about the trends in technology that influence social media as it develops across the board.

6. How should NAFME position itself to ensure growth, sustainability, and relevancy as it relates to the current political climate, the need to recruit and retain music educators, and the financial realities faced by school systems and our family of associations.

Patrick K. Freer: Ditto. I agree. But I also think that we don't know what the challenges will be, because if we've learned nothing in the last couple of years. We've learned that what we think today is different tomorrow. And so what this calls for is a constancy of purpose, of intent, and an awareness of why we do what we do, and when we take an action, why we're taking that action, so that we can know when not to over-respond or when not to under-respond. I think that this, then, is a challenge that comes down to the individual state levels, especially when we see challenges to funding that affects small schools and what happens if the small school experiences a crisis in the music education program that then impacts a larger school the students would go to later in their academic career. I think all of these issues are interdefined and what we need to provide is that constancy, that community of music educators that are there for one another.

Judy Bush: It's really easy for us to get distracted by the things that are happening, and it's even more easy to get distracted if we don't know what our true focus is, and the true focus is we want every kid, regardless of situation, socioeconomic status, race, gender, anything else, disability, we want to make sure that every child has a way to be in music, and if we keep that our focus, all the other stuff, it changes, right? But we've got to keep that one narrow focus on our students and helping our teachers be able to offer the best for those students.

7. Would you like to share any last remarks with the audience before we close?

Patrick K. Freer: One piece of advice I often offer developing teachers is this, the student is the constant, not the music teacher. The students are lucky that we are theirs. Music teachers come and go along the trajectory of a student's life. If we are lucky they will have several music teachers. We have just a moment in time to give young people a gift of music education that they carry with them long after they depart our care. So what can we do in June 2025 to make it more likely that a student will, in June 2045, 20 years from now, be singing to their daughter, playing in a band, composing, and arranging songs for a specific orchestra? What can we do today to improve that future? Thank you again for the opportunity to be with you today.

Judy Bush: Well, you know, I want to say this. Sit there and really think about what it was that changed this trajectory of your life to become a music educator. What was it? What was it that made you feel like this was important and made you important? And how can you take that then and you can bring that for others? It's all about sharing. It's all about giving others purpose. It's all about serving. And if we can make change that, then we can help young people to understand that that is their focus and not how they're not being a great teacher and winning awards and, you know, band contests or whatever it is. It's about how the kid feels when they walk off the field or off the stage. It's about how they feel about themselves as a person. And that means every child. And so I would just like us to think about how important music is to us and how we want to make that feeling come alive for these students.