

Tests, Music, and Homeschooling

By Nicky Hardenbergh

While glancing through a magazine about music teaching, I saw an article entitled something like: "Should music teachers be emphasizing the higher test results of music students?" Turns out music teachers are facing the same dilemma as homeschoolers. Sure, both homeschoolers and music students may test above average on standardized tests. And sure, both homeschoolers and music teachers may be tempted to publicize the higher test scores. But do we actually want higher test results to be the justification for our enterprises?

Seems to me that music teachers would want the justification for music to rest on its intrinsic merits: the joy of making music, the nurturance of musical literacy. Yet, there is a strong temptation to use whatever arguments might be effective in gaining more funding for the music programs.

Similarly, even though most homeschoolers recognize that the real value of homeschooling rests on things that cannot be measured by tests (maintaining the joy of learning, nurturing our children's native curiosity into a lively intelligence, protecting family time, avoiding time-wasting busywork, etc. etc.), there is a strong temptation to utilize the above-average test scores to justify this non-conventional educational approach. Since the public schools are so focused on test scores as the sign of a successful education, homeschool advocates naturally like to demonstrate that homeschooled students can achieve high scores without the benefit of a formal school.

However, emphasizing test scores is a trap. Once we posit that homeschooling should be endorsed by policy makers because of high test scores, we have painted ourselves into a corner. What about those students who do not perform better than average? Should they be denied homeschooling? A policymaker might reach just such a conclusion if he thought that the value of homeschooling lay in the fact the homeschoolers do better than average on standardized tests.

A below-average student derives tremendous benefit from homeschooling. Parents of special needs students are discovering that their children can thrive in the homeschool environment. Likewise, music teachers know that sometimes the student who derives the most value from music class is the one who is not doing well in his academic subjects.

Rather than tacitly endorse the idea that standardized tests are the proper way to measure education, I'd rather simply emphasize to policy makers one simple fact: there is no evidence to indicate that home education produces anything less than the range of outcomes found in public school. And as for the music educators, they'll have to figure out their own strategies.