

# What Do We Really Know About Arts Education?

MENC leads push for collecting key data from every state in the nation ■ BY DEBBIE GALANTE BLOCK

Music education advocates looking for facts and figures to further their cause have been working at a disadvantage for a long time. No consistent national data exist on education in any of the arts; no one can state with certainty the number of schools across the country with arts programs, for example, or the number of students participating in those programs. Some individual states collect such information, but their data points are not universal, which means that any efforts to determine the overall state of arts education in the U.S. are necessarily piecemeal. However, this situation may be changing. The Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) and the State Education Agency Directors of Arts Education (SEADAE) have recently recommended that key data be collected in all core subjects, including the arts, in all states.

Under the leadership of President Scott C. Shuler, MENC has been deeply involved in the effort to improve national data gathering. "To eliminate the achievement gap in arts education," Shuler says, "we need to collect data about students' opportunity to learn, and use that data to identify focal points for school improvement."

MENC has recommended that states collect key data about the arts through their school report card systems. According to Shuler, Connecticut and a few other states have been developing a promising system that could also be used for data collection: Common Formative Assessments in the Arts, which "take the form of rich units with embedded assessments to guide and monitor student arts



MENC President Scott Shuler (far left) and Deputy Executive Director/COO Michael Blakeslee (third from left) were among the attendees at a recent arts education summit in Annapolis, Maryland, cosponsored by the CCSSO and the SAEDAE.

learning, linked to standards."

Has there been any progress so far on making national data collection a reality? "MENC deserves credit for promoting the idea that, by partnering with other core subjects, we could be more

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successful in garnering the support of policymakers," Shuler says. "The SEADAE has done some initial work on collaborative item development and the South Carolina Department of Education has developed a basic system for online administration of arts items.

"It's always a challenge to accomplish a nationwide change," Shuler adds, "because we have to move the federal gov-

ernment. I suggested to MENC that we approach the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) and say that we're not alone in thinking that skewed curricula are bad for kids. In record time, they pulled together signatures from organizations interested in government, civics, history, world language, physical education, and health and published a statement under ASCD's byline saying we believe that curricula need to be balanced."

The Elementary and Secondary Education Act, a.k.a. No Child Left Behind, is overdue for reauthorization. Shuler says that if in that reauthorization "we can make sure, at the very least, that there is language mandating that certain variables be collected universally, we can make a clear case that kids have an equitable opportunity in education—including the arts—and praise those who are doing a better job." ❧