

Use The Standards To Empower!

Every educator or administrator, whether teaching music or otherwise, has state standards on his/ her mind. The powers that be want to make sure our youth are learning the necessary skills and information for a successful life before graduating from high school. Theoretically, this is the perfect solution to the failing school problem. In reality, it adds red tape where it isn't necessary. It is true that children need to leave school knowing skills and facts, but the real question is: if they don't know something, do they know where to find the answer and more importantly, how to obtain it.

In the end it is all about children having the confidence needed to go out there in our great big world and accomplish their dreams. Knowledge is also required, but wasted if one does not know what to do with it. Only through hands-on experiences can children truly understand the power of knowledge. If a person knows how to build a house, but doubts her ability, then that knowledge will be of no use. On the flip side, if one believes that he can accomplish anything he puts his mind to, but lacks the knowledge on how, he will find a way to figure it out and make it happen. Its all in how we look at our goals?

Standards are an opportunity to show kids what is possible and to give them a clear idea of what they need to learn. We can empower our students, rather than intimidate them. I am reminded of a quote from the movie The Blind Side. In it, Kathy Bates plays Miss Sue, who is Michael Oher's tutor. At one point they are working on an assignment and he says to her "I don't understand it." She replies "Yet. You don't understand it yet." Then she goes on to say that she will be the person to help him understand the information and that he **will** get it. Our job is a bit more complicated in that we service more than one student at a time. Some of us see as many as 40 or more at one time. This makes it significantly more difficult to meet our goals and standards.

So how can we use standards to empower our students? What kinds of experiences do our children benefit from? Those that create opportunities for discovery. Most of us are already meeting many of the required standards with our activities, but let's push it a step further. Let's let our students create music and have them uncover what is possible. For example, all of the state standards require students to know dynamics, tempo, instrumentation just to name a few. When a child creates music, we can ask our students those probing questions: should we sing or play this on instruments? Should it be loud or soft? Fast or slow? When we create a classroom piece, can there be sections that are loud? Slow? Etc.. We are getting our students to think critically about their work. Later on when kids hear more complicated works from others, they will have a strong foundation on which to build. Because they *experienced* the act of creation, they will be better equipped to describe and think critically about what they have heard. The standards will be a mere side effect, rather than the driving force.