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A Study of the Musical, Academic, Leadership, and Extracurricular Achievement Massachusetts All-State Participants

R. Nicholas Tobin

University of Massachusetts, Lowell

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Abstract

Researchers have noted that the personal attributes of high school all-state participants have not been probed and have expressed surprise at this void in the music education literature (Cole, 1986; Fuller, 1989; Welker, 1997). The purpose of this study was to ascertain, through participant self-report data, the activities and accomplishments of Massachusetts all-state musicians in four areas of student endeavor: music, academics, leadership, and extracurricular activities. Massachusetts all-state participants are high achievers not only in music but also in academics, honors, student government, leadership, athletics, service, and extracurricular activities. Suggestions for further research include broadening similar studies to other states and other disciplines to attempt to isolate characteristics of all-state students.

Historical Context: The Birth of Festivals: 1922-1950

Massed choruses date back at least as far as the fourth century B.C. (Campbell, 1955) and today every state in the U.S. provides an all-state experience for high school students (Welker, 1997). These festivals emerged during the early twentieth century as the merit of music contests began to be questioned and a move towards festivals began to grow. Dann (1936) made the argument succinctly:

Does the word *contest* suggest friendly rivalry? Does it radiate the festive spirit which these events should generate and promote? Or does it stress victory and defeat?... We know that the most serious objections to musical contests are directly due to misplaced emphasis upon winning, to the devastating ambition to defeat an opponent. The bitter spirit and bad blood which too often develop between schools and communities, during and after these contests, are directly traceable to this unfortunate fighting spirit – to a fierce desire and determination to “lick the other fellow.” (p. 347)

During the first half of the twentieth century the concept of festivals took root as illustrated by the writings of several music educators. Pitcher (1927) argued for concerts of several groups from different schools playing and singing for each other and an audience but with the concluding pieces of the program performed by all of the groups combined. Beattie (1929) has written a delightful and charming argument for the adaptation of festivals over the more prevalent contests. He proposes:

With our present day choral and instrumental organizations, with transportation made easy by good roads and commodious and numerous automobiles why are we making so little progress in the carrying on and developing of the Festival idea? There are probably many reasons but the chief one seems to be that the school music director is weighed down by that two headed monster, the operetta and contest bogey. The average small town supervisor must do two things or lose his job. He is obliged to stage at least one operetta annually and he must prepare individual star performers and various groups of performers for the annual music contests. And maybe after all his hard work, he loses his job, anyway, for be it known, if the operetta is not bigger and better than last year's show, he is considered at [sic] behind the times, while if his entrants in the contest fail to bring

home at least one first place and enough seconds and thirds to swell his total to respectable size he will need to begin looking around for a new location. The show must be a success; the contest must be won. Otherwise he is not a good music teacher. (p. 353)

Merker (1936) described a new mindset of music educators during the 1930s as the shift from contests to festivals grew. “We now sponsor two major school events each year – one being entirely festival, the other being a combination contest-festival – with the emphasis gradually turning towards the festival idea” (p. 343).

Maddy (1929) noted that the first all-state high school orchestra was formed, as an experiment, in 1922 in Indiana and he described as promising the growth of these orchestras by 1929 to 21 other states. His opinion was that these experiences brought “higher ideals and renewed ambitions” (p. 77) to both students and their music supervisors. These orchestras had “done more to convince the superintendents and other educators of the value of school music than almost any other phase of the work during the last six years” (p. 75). He also supported the idea of an all-state chorus but not for all-state bands because he felt contests for bands provided greater stimuli for students.

In 1936 the New England Music Festival Association brought together about 500 New England high school musicians to form a regional band, chorus and orchestra to “stimulate the students and their teachers to such a degree that they return to their homes eager for better school music – and better community music” (Merker, 1936, p. 343).

The Growth of All-State: 1950 onward

It was during the second half of the century that the festival idea blossomed into what are now known as “all-state” festivals. Several aspects of the all-state experience have been studied but no research was found which addressed both the musical and non-musical characteristics of all-state participants.

Campbell (1955) sought to determine if all-state festivals were important to music education programs in Pennsylvania. Many students from both the 1947 and 1954 all-state groups indicated the activity to be the high point of their high school years and 85% identified the festival as making music more important in their lives (p. 163). Over 90% of surveyed high school principals also believed the experience to be a positive one for students from their schools. Both students and principals felt it offered musical opportunities surpassing those existing in local schools.

Friffin (1996) believed “performing in an all-state organization is the ultimate experience for a high school music student” (p. 20). Greenlee (1982) concluded that students found working with an all-state conductor was a major benefit of the experience while Elliot (1995) and Lien and Humphreys (2001) alleged that membership in an all-state group would result in enhanced recruitment by college music departments and greater opportunities for scholarships.

DeCarbo, Fiese, and Boyle, in a 1990 study of Florida all-state instrumental students, noticed gender differences among certain instrument families. Females tended to play more woodwind and string instruments than males while brass and percussion players were apt to be male. They concluded that a majority of all-state instrumentalists began their musical studies before the seventh grade and students in the orchestra initiated study at an earlier age than those in the band. Many of the students who participated in their study indicated an intention to continue to play their instruments after graduation from high school and several intended to major in music in college.

Concern about the all-state audition process has resulted in several studies. Perkins (1991) concluded that judges for the Texas all-state orchestra auditions to be in high agreement and used “similar criteria in ranking the student performances and that minimal levels of subjectivity were present in the adjudication process” (p. 22). Elliot (1995) suggests that the audition process needs more study. Wapnick, Mazza, and Darrow (1998) found the physical attractiveness of an auditionee to influence audition scores.

Fuller (1989) concluded previous audition experience to be the largest predictor for acceptance into select choirs in Texas and student motivation to possibly be a more important factor than instruction for success. He also compiled a lengthy list of factors related to musical ability, which correlates with successful all-state choir auditions.

Dugger’s 1997 analysis showed little or no difference in the reliability between Olympic style and non-Olympic style judging. Lien & Humphreys (2001) examined the effects of school enrollment, distance to audition site, sex, and instrument type on the results of the 1992-97 South Dakota all-state band auditions. McClung (2001) found moveable do to be the most prevalent method of sight singing, followed by melody pitch numbers, for schools who supplied all-state chorus members in six southern states.

Need for the Study

The studies culled above suggest that researchers tend to study all-state students who participate in groups with whom they have personal interest, i.e. instrumental researchers study all-state bands or orchestras and vocalists prefer to study all-state choruses. Few studies, if any, have been conducted which consider these groups as a totality, all-state participants.

It is of interest to note how few studies have been completed addressing the effects of these all-state events on both the participating students and on their effect on music education. Although all-state groups had existed for as long as 50 years, Fuller (1989) was surprised as to how little research had been conducted regarding them. He opined that all-state groups, requiring much effort and financial support, should have attracted more scrutiny and analysis. Welker (1997), too, was puzzled by what she called the dearth of information pertaining to All-State bands.

Garder (1955) maintained from the time of the early Greeks until modern times the musician has been considered a rather eccentric individual.... Musicians of the present

day are described in general as quite emotional, imaginative almost to a pathological degree, not punctual or scientific, displaying a certain lack of mental balance, and possessing a liability to neurasthenia and hysteria. This description is based largely on studies of professional musicians, musical geniuses and child prodigies and is a quite widely held opinion concerning the musician. (p. 11)

Garder (1955) personally disagreed with such an assumption and felt the young musician of his day was “an all-around individual with a wide range of interests and abilities, one who is superior to his non-musical peer in many respects” (p. 12). In an attempt to resolve this dichotomy, Garder conducted a study of 279 outstanding high school musicians and compared them to 281 students in study halls. He concluded

... the young amateur musician is an active, highly intelligent individual with a wide range of interests, abilities and activities both in and out of music. He is a recognized leader among his classmates, above-average in academic achievement, and comes from an above-average home. As a person he is a little less objective and somewhat less adept in his personal relationships than other students. The boy musician is less active, less emotionally stable and less masculine in his interests while the girl musician is less restrained and less friendly. (p. 19)

With a similar focus, through a survey of the 1986 all-state bands and orchestras in Georgia, Cole (1986) was unable to unearth research that characterized students who had participated in all-state groups but did conclude that the high quality of these groups could be attributed to the cooperation of both the school band and orchestra director and the student’s private music teacher.

Purpose of the Study

Researchers have noted that personal attributes of high school all-state participants have not been probed and have expressed surprise at this void in the music education literature (Cole, 1986; Fuller 1989; Welker, 1997). It was the purpose of this study to ascertain the self reported activities and accomplishments of Massachusetts all-state musicians in four areas of student endeavor: music, academics, leadership, and extracurricular activities.

Method

The present study is a result of an enquiry from the president of the Massachusetts Music Educators Association (MMEA) to the MMEA research chair if he could design a questionnaire to query Massachusetts all-state ensemble members (band, chorus, jazz ensemble, and orchestra) about their musical and non-musical behaviors and activities. The resulting questionnaire was administered to all-state participants during two consecutive years. Data from the initial administration of the questionnaire were presented to the state association president and executive board while the combined results from two years are presented here in order to share the results with the profession.

Surveys were administered during the Thursday or Friday rehearsals, at the discretion of the manager of each group, prior to the Saturday all-state performance. Students were requested to participate but were not required to do so. Not all students answered each question, however all responses were tabulated; hence, the total number of responses per question varies slightly. The percentage of participants and their gender is presented in table 1. More than 70% of students completed the questionnaire and data from a total of 727 surveys were obtained, however but not all students completed all questions. Responses were entered into SPSS statistical software and frequency descriptive statistics were tabulated for each question. Responses to questions such as musical and non-musical accomplishments were open ended and, although entered into SPSS, resulted in many unique and personal statements.

Table 1. Numbers of students

Total Number of all-state students	978	Respondents to questionnaire	727
Male	463	Male	345
Female	499	Female	379
Unknown	16	Unknown	3
Percent of students	100	Percent of students	74

Since the initial purpose of the survey was not designed as a study but merely for data gathering for the MMEA president, more information was gathered than could be presented through this study.

Results

Readers are cautioned to keep in mind that data are self reported, that not all students answered all questions, and that no attempt has been made to determine the accuracy of student responses. It is important to note that it is possible for a portion of any self report data to be spurious if students decide to not be truthful.

General Academic Information

All-state participants were asked to indicate if they were aware of their class rank and, if they were, to indicate if they were in the top 50%, 33%, 25%, 10%, 5%, or 2% of their class. Responses are listed in Table 2.

Table 2. Self-Reported Class Rank

	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent

Don't know	221	30.4	31.3
Top 2%	106	14.6	46.2
Top 5%	95	13.1	59.6
Top 25%	103	14.2	89.6
Top 33%	35	4.8	94.5
Top 50%	38	5.2	99.9
Total	710		97.7
Missing	17		2.3

For the 316 students who had taken the SAT, verbal scores ranged from 410 to 800 with a mean of 647. SAT math scores ranged from 400 to 800 with a mean score of 643. The mean combined verbal and math SAT scores was 1291.

Over 98%, or 712 students planned on going to college and 80% of those students had decided on an initial major. Fifty-three different majors were listed by these students and were scattered throughout the curriculum. Twenty-one percent had chosen history, the most frequently cited major. Slightly over 29% indicated they were going to major in music and of those 19% listed music performance as their major, 5.5% music education, and 4.7% music. A major in performing arts accounted for 4.4% and 2.2% in music theatre. Over 95% indicated they planned to continue to sing and/or play in musical groups in college. Fifty-six percent of the students indicated their parents were also musical.

Musical Behaviors/Achievements

Students were asked to estimate the amount of time they practiced each week and 706 responses were obtained. The mean amount of practice time was 6.3 hours.

Participants were requested to list the musical accomplishments and/or honors that had meant the most to them. Hundreds of responses were listed. The most frequently mentioned achievements related to acceptance into various musical groups such as all-state, district ensembles, the Massachusetts Youth Wind Ensemble, and the Greater Boston Youth Symphony Orchestra. Several students listed winning musical competitions and/or medals, participating in musicals, trips to Europe with their ensembles, and playing in Symphony Hall in Boston. Some listed unique musical accomplishments of which they were most proud, such as “playing in a Maynard Ferguson concert,” “having the first solo in my new school’s auditorium,” “singing the national anthem at a ball field,” “offering of a record contract from MCA records,” and “with lead in musical overcame stage fright.”

Non-Musical Behaviors/Achievements

Participants were also asked to list up to 5 non-musical school honors, activities, clubs, teams, and/or organizations in which they were members and any offices that they have held. The range of responses was expansive and most have been grouped into clusters and listed below. Musical achievements have been addressed above and are therefore not included in the list. For activities, rewards, etc. receiving more than a single response the number of students listing them are in parenthesis, i.e. National Honor Society (157).

Academic honors and awards

National Honor Society (157), honor roll (30), school academic honors (12), National Honor Society officer (5), other honor society memberships (4), National Merit Scholarship recognition (3), Academic Decathlon (3)

Arts (other than music)

drama/theatre/poetry (85), art (5), literary magazine (2)

Athletic

track (82), soccer (37), cross country (32), swim team (28), tennis (26), basketball (18), volleyball (16), softball (12), football (9), athletic team captain (20), ski club (4), athletic awards (3), cheerleading (2), other athletic teams including bowling, crew, cross country skiing, Frisbee, golf, gymnastics, horse riding, lacrosse, sailing team, self defense, shooting, ski team, snowboarding team, wrestling

Awards

academic, citizenship, and civic organization awards (15), book awards (5)

Extra Curricular Activities

Students Against Drunk Driving (38), Gay-Straight Alliance (24), school newspaper/literary publications (23), Amnesty International (21), yearbook (23), non-musical visual and performing arts (13), key club (8), chess club (6), other clubs (8), scouts (5), church groups (5), Asian clubs (3), speech team (2)

Other Extra Curricular Activities

Classics club, computer team, cultural affinity group, debate team, Future Problem Solvers, interact newspaper quiz, Mock Trial, Odyssey of the Mind, peer leaders fundraising committee, prayer group, school accreditation committee, Old Sturbridge Village internship, students for change, TV Soccer, Youth Alive, youth group

Languages

French awards/honors/club (30), Latin awards/honors/club (8), Spanish awards/honors/club (2), other foreign language awards/honors/club (4), English and literature awards (4)

Leadership

club officer (17), school yearbook/newspaper officer (7), other leadership positions such as Boy's/Girls State, school committee representative, etc. (15)

Mathematics and Science

math team (45), science team (28), math awards (9), science awards (5), math/science club officers (5), other math/science organizations (10), calculus team

Service

community service (11), hospital/nursing home volunteer (6), volunteer work (3)

Student Government

class president (18), student council (16), other class/school officer/representative (9)

Summary and Discussion

Massachusetts all-state participants are high achievers not only in music but also in academics, honors, student government, leadership, athletics, service, and extracurricular activities. Since they have been selected through a rigorous competitive process, they can be considered to be among the best high school musicians in the state. They practice about an hour a day, a statistic that may be more impressive if choral students tend to practice less than their instrumental colleagues. It should be noted that many of these students rehearse and perform not only in their school musical groups but also as members of several other local, state, and national musical organizations. Almost thirty per cent plan to major in music in college. Their lives seem to be full of music.

Many of these students have had remarkable success outside of music. Over 40% reported they were in the upper quartile of their class; however, this figure may be somewhat higher since 30% were not aware of their class rank. SAT scores, averaging about 1290, indicate they should be successful in their future academic endeavors since, almost without exception, they plan to go to college. Many have received prestigious academic awards from their school, community, and local, state, and national academic organizations. They hold or have held a myriad of student government leadership positions. Outstanding musicians seem also to be outstanding academics.

The breadth of their activities is notable. They participate in many extracurricular activities, have a commitment to community service, and are involved in a multitude of community activities. They are also athletic, participate in many school and community athletic events, and hold team captainships or other sports leadership positions.

Music educators should find this information useful. It is evident that these students value their musical experiences since it takes a substantial commitment of time and energy to reach an acceptable level of musical competence for all-state selection. The data gleaned from this study could be used to advocate for music programs in all communities. Although no cause and effect relationship can be determined from this study, these findings do suggest that students who excel in music also tend to succeed in other endeavors. Focused study of music, of value in itself, may enhance confidence and encourage students to be successful in other areas. Such insight, if vigorously promulgated by music educators, might have an influence on school administrators as they tussle with the value of arts education.

Additionally, since most students are usually well aware of their peers' successes, they are cognizant of the personality, academic, and social characteristics of students selected to all-state groups. Positive comments from returning all-state performers about their experience may entice others to emulate them and join performing groups. Such feedback could be a powerful recruiting tool for music teachers.

Finally, knowledge of all-state students' successes both in and out of the music classroom may serve to reinforce the music teacher's image of his or her value to the school and the community. All educators learn the value of reinforcement during their training and the successes of their students may well prove to be welcome reinforcement of the value of their work.

Suggestions for Further Research

As a group these students excel in music, academics, leadership, and service. Do they excel both as musicians and non musicians because their study of music has excited their interest in other areas or is it because they are naturally gifted in several areas or some combination of both? Is their overall success in some measure due to the study of music, which somehow predisposes them to excel in non-musical related fields, or is music simply one of the areas to which intelligent and talented students gravitate?

It could be fruitful to study whether successful students in academics, service, and leadership but who do not participate in musical performance groups share similar profiles with these all-state students or if these music students are unique. The gathering of similar data from successful students who do not participate in musical activities could be the beginning of a research stream to suggest whether the study of music stimulates other accomplishments or if already accomplished students are attracted to music.

Finally, since research from other states is negligible (Cole, 1986; Fuller, 1989; Welker, 1997) it would be of interest to learn if all-state students from other states exhibit similar musical, academic, service, and leadership characteristics. Case studies of individual students or small groups of students from a single school might suggest hypotheses, which could eventually be tested.

All-state participants hold dear the memory of their experience throughout their lives. Music educators should take pride in the role they play as ushers of aesthetic education to new generations of citizens and should be cognizant of the multifaceted qualities of the students whose lives they touch.

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[About the Author](#) - A native of Montana, Nicholas Tobin holds a B.A. from Notre Dame, an M.A. from Stanford University and a Ph.D. from the University of Connecticut. After completing his work at Stanford, Dr. Tobin found himself in the United States Army in Korea during the Vietnam War. Following a stint in the infantry, a transfer to the Seventh Infantry Division Bayonet Chorus was ordered, and for the ensuing six months he toured Korea performing music and theater for both military personnel and Korean citizens.

Upon his military discharge, Dr. Tobin moved to the Boston area and was employed for fifteen years in the Milford, Massachusetts public schools where he taught music at all levels from the first grade through high school including general music, chorus, music theatre, and even English, history, and geography.

Upon completion of the Ph.D. in 1990, he taught at Boston University and then at Regis College and served on the executive board of the Massachusetts Music Educators Association for over ten years. In 2002, Dr. Tobin accepted a position at the University of Massachusetts, Lowell as a professor of music education and coordinator of graduate studies.