

BY MARCIA NEEL



Concerts As Career Labs

Think back to when you were a child and ask yourself, “What did I want to be when I grew up?” Maybe you had an early sense that music would be part of your future. Or perhaps your dreams leaned in an entirely different direction: airline pilot, veterinarian, nurse, firefighter. If so, what changed? Not for all, but for many who ultimately pursued a career in music, the answer was, “the influence of a music educator.”

Unfortunately, careers in music are not always enthusiastically promoted by parents or counselors simply because they may have limited knowledge of how music careers can provide viable and rewarding livelihoods. The reality is that median annual incomes in music-related professions can typically range from \$49,000 to \$79,000, but leadership roles in the music industry can command salaries exceeding \$230,000 (NAMM Foundation). Senior positions, and entrepreneurial opportunities in the music industry, can dwarf these figures exponentially. Beyond earnings, a career in music offers the chance to work alongside creative, diverse, and passionate individuals, often resulting in a deeply purpose-driven and fulfilling professional life.

Today, more than 673,000 businesses are involved in the creation or distribution of the arts, collectively employing approximately 3.48 million people, and those numbers continue to increase. This raises an important question for music educators: How do we help students envision themselves in careers like these?

A Single Concert Can Open the Door to Dozens of Careers

Take just one minute to watch a YouTube video of a high-level musical performance. It might be an all-state concert, a Broadway production, or a show by a major touring artist. As you watch, make a list of every job that had to exist - beyond those of the performers - for that event to take place. How many roles did you identify?

Every concert involves dozens of people with responsibilities and careers in the music industry and creative sectors. With that realization comes an opportunity for career awareness, and even more importantly, opportunities for students to engage in authentic, real-world experiences connected to those roles. The chart below illustrates the wide range of roles essential to the production of a successful concert and highlights how these experiences can serve as powerful “career labs” for students.

The Equity Lens: When We Redefine Participation, We Redefine Access

In reality, not all students see themselves as “performers.” Many, however, identify as creators, editors, designers, technicians, or producers. When we limit participation solely to the music-makers, we risk losing students - not because they lack a passion for music, but because we have not shown them enough ways to participate.

	Real-World Career Connections	Student Opportunities
Program Designer	Arts administration, event planning	Students design program layout, write bios
Stage Crew & Logistics	Production management, live sound, lighting	Students manage stage flow, cues, mics
Publicity Team	Marketing, social media management	Students create posters, social posts, press releases
Photographer / Videographer	Content creation, music journalism	Students shoot and edit media
Master of Ceremonies	Broadcasting, public speaking	Students script transitions and host
Community Liaison	Nonprofit engagement, donor relations	Students coordinate sponsors, volunteers
Recording & Editing	Audio engineering, music tech	Students capture, mix, and publish recordings

There are countless students in every school who would eagerly engage with a performance-based music program if we invited them to do so through roles that match their interests and strengths. Representation in music education is not only about who is seen onstage; it is also about who helped build the total experience. Concerts truly “take a village,” and inclusive concert planning leads directly to more inclusive music education programs.

The Redesign Spirit: Taking the First Step

When concerts are intentionally framed as career labs, music educators expand their curriculum to include authentic career pathways such as:

- Arts and media production
- Marketing and communications
- Event logistics and entrepreneurship
- Technology and sound engineering
- Leadership and project management
- Partnership development

Each of these areas aligns with established career pathways in arts, AV technology, and communications fields that are actively seeking broader and more equitable student participation.

Now imagine your next concert providing just five student

At the end of November, Marcia Neel and Annamarie Bollino, President of the NAFME Eastern Division, did a session together at the Virginia MEA conference called “Charting The Course From Classroom To Career: Concerts As Career Labs” which received a lot of positive response. [Click here for the the handout they distributed is included here.](#)

You can also click here go to this landing page to access the presentation itself, along with other resources.

career experiences beyond performance. What might those opportunities look like? Consider a few entry points:

- Student-produced podcast or video pre-show interviews
- Lighting-crew playlist or mood designer
- Program copywriter responsible for concert notes and bios
- Concert photographer or videographer
- Social media or Instagram curator

Each of these roles strengthen the musical integrity of the concert by expanding ownership, deepening engagement, and validating a wider range of student talents. Every concert is already a career fair. Our task is

simply to open the doors and invite students into the jobs. **T**



MARCIA NEEL serves as Senior Director of Education for Yamaha Corporation of America. She also serves as Education Advisor to the Music Achievement Council, a 501(c)(6) organization whose sole purpose is to assist directors in recruiting and retaining students in instrumental music programs through effective professional development.