

THE SOUND *of* SILENCE

After some 330 school layoffs county-wide, Daphne High's choral program hangs in the balance—but only the state can save it now

Editor's Note: This is the second in a series of articles the Daphne Bulletin plans to publish on school programs affected by the economic recession.

Are you a student, parent of a student, or faculty member at a Daphne or Spanish Fort school affected by budget cuts?

E-mail bulletin@gulfcoastnewspapers.com, or call 626-9300 during regular office hours, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., Monday through Friday. We may share your story in a future edition.

By Thomas Boni

Editor
tboni@gulfcoastnewspapers.com

Allen Barber—president of the Jubilee Sounds, Daphne High School's choral program—just wants other students to have the same opportunity he had as a freshman: to express oneself.

"I would hate for other students to have to lose that just because the school has only a certain number of teachers they can keep," said the senior, who has participated in the choral program all four of his high-school years. "It's just ridiculous."

Barber—a University of Montevallo-bound student set to graduate May 18—plans to study mass communications and hopes to become a radio broadcaster. If all works out, he said he can credit choral lessons.

"I know the choir has toned my voice (for broadcasting)," he said.

Next fall, DHS students with similar goals will have to seek private lessons—or do without a controlled environment of expression—as Donna Toler, the Sounds' instructor, won't be on the payroll.

Ditto for the course she teaches, which last week she learned was the latest casualty of necessary budget cuts due to a crippled economy. That, she believes, leaves musically gifted students less incentive.

"Choir ... is the thing that keeps them coming to school and dealing with all the academic things that they're trying to deal with," Toler said.

“ I'm like everybody else, hoping that some of the stimulus money finds its way to our neck of the woods and that we're able to save the program; as of now, that's not the case. But, we're still hopeful. ”



Blanchard

—Daphne High School Principal Don Blanchard



Illustration by Thomas Boni

The Baldwin County Board of Education, facing a \$23 million deficit, must decide which programs to keep and which teachers must be let go; school choir programs have been the most affected, according to Vicky Cook, the school system's fine-arts and library supervisor.

The lifelong music lover as a student couldn't have dreamed such a fate could befall a high-school music program, and said she can't fathom what her students are experiencing, having heard the news.

"I can only imagine how these students who are planning on getting scholarships" in music will cope with the program's loss, she said. "Without the choral background they are seriously held back from getting a choral scholarship."

DHS Principal Don Blanchard holds out hope that the program's loss is a temporary setback, noting the Alabama Legislature has yet to decide on apportionments from its share of the federal stimulus funding, which reportedly includes \$1 billion for education.

"I'm like everybody else, hoping that some of the stimulus money finds its way to our neck of the woods and that we're able to save the program; as of now, that's not the case," Blanchard said. "But, we're still hopeful."

Daphne High School lost 16 units—the legislature's term for teachers—among a reported 330 positions county-wide, according to a Baldwin County schools spokesperson.

The cuts put a damper on year-end spirits.

"Because some of these teachers I consider friends and they've all done a good job for us, to be in this situation casts a dark cloud over what normally would be a happy time," Blanchard said, referring to commencement.

Some non-tenured teachers' programs affected by budget cuts won't themselves be cut, according to school officials, but that means tenured teachers rehired for next school year must take up the slack.

Continued from Page 1A

“We try to have as many things as we can that the students are interested in, so that it gives them an identity, something to belong to, to express their individual talents,” Blanchard said, referring, in part, to the Student Government Association and the school’s swim team, which both lost teaching units. “These are things teachers do outside of reading, writing and arithmetic, and grading papers.”

The goal is to ensure that teaching duties are distributed evenly, to prevent overload—and a subsequent quality trade-off in core subjects: math, science, English and social studies, Blanchard said.

Teachers who lack tenure, or certification in dual subjects, however, are let go; that, at least, was the case with last week’s layoffs.

Some at DHS—especially those affiliated with the choral program—believe that’s a shame, particularly amid the Sounds’ banner year. Toler, who last year taught Fairhope High School’s now-defunct music program, led Daphne’s group to victory; the audition-only membership in April performed at statewide competition and the choir earlier scored all 1s, the highest mark possible, for its showing at a District 7 performance assessment.

“We went to state, which is a huge thing for our choir; the football team didn’t even go to state ...” Barber said.

Daphne’s Trojans this year made the state playoffs, but did not take the state championship.

“We’ve tried in the past to come up with fundraisers ... but it didn’t seem like a lot of people in the school were interested in it.

That’s why we need a lot of support ... because without the support, we can’t really hope for anything.”

—Allen Barber, student president of Daphne High School’s Jubilee Sounds

Even so, Barber said, “I’m not (bashing the football team), but they remain untouched.”

That, according to Blanchard, is because the school’s coaches serve dual roles.

“We have a physics teacher that coaches football and driver’s ed teachers that coach football and two P.E. teachers that coach football and history teachers that coach football ...” he said. “They are teachers first. The extracurricular activities (come second).”

A lack of support

Through it all, it seems, the writing was on the wall. Though Fairhope’s loss of Toler was Daphne’s gain; the Jubilee Sounds proved successful; and an ambitious choral council brainstormed ways to offset the group’s expenses, due to an economic recession and a perceived lack in support during fundraisers, it wasn’t enough.

“We’ve tried in the past to come up with fundraisers (such as doughnut and catalogue sales) ... but it didn’t seem like a lot of people in the school were interested in it,” Barber said. “That’s why we need a lot of support ... because

without the support, we can’t really hope for anything.”

Careful to add that several DHS faculty members championed their efforts, he implied that the Sounds’ awareness couldn’t compete with pigskin.

“Maybe the fine-arts program doesn’t get the word out as much as the football team; but if it were to receive the same acknowledgments, I believe we would be able to get the kind of support we desire,” Barber said.

Until student opinion changes, the program at least has the principal’s support.

“To me, a complete high school not only has a marching band and a football team; it has a chorus, along with baseball and everything else,” Blanchard said. “The choral program is as important to those students as the football team is to the football players, as the band is to the bandsmen, as art is to the artists—and I think it’s important to have all of those.

“We’re just in an unfortunate time that’s causing us to make these gutwrenching decisions.”

If state funding doesn’t come through, and the choral program indeed is axed, Trojan

‘Broadway Revue’

Do you support the arts in Daphne schools?

If so, you might like to attend Daphne High’s ‘Broadway Revue,’ set for 7 p.m., May 5 at Trojan Hall.

Tickets: \$3 each.

Hall, the fine-arts building—formerly the Eastern Shore Christian Center, which the school board purchased for \$4.5 million in 2007—will be waiting.

“My plans are not to use that space for anything else, but to be able to add the choral program back at the very first opportunity,” Blanchard said.

Barber hopes that scenario transpires, as he believes the Jubilee Sounds class teaches positive character traits and lifts spirits.

Barber recalled being a lone freshman, when upperclassmen in the Sounds took him under their wings.

“Those seniors taught me diligence and they taught me how to lead people,” he said.

Barber, just weeks away from closing his high-school career, questioned whether necessary budget cuts could cost future students more than choir.

“I don’t want to come back from college and see that there’s just no spirit in the school,” he said. “We sing at every major event the school does.

“We raise the spirit of everybody in there.”

Staff writers Sasha Heller and Tony Whitehead contributed to this report.