The Missouri State Board of Education met on January 22, 2013. Members in attendance were Archie, Ponder, Still, Herschend, Demien. Absent were Jones and Shields (Shields called in for the afternoon session). Prior to lunch the board took care of various ceremonial duties (including bidding farewell to Member Ponder, who has resigned effective the end of the meeting to join the Board of Curators of the University of Missouri), a presentation on the new MO LEAD, program for training for administrators as educational leaders, a report of tax credits and their impact on education funding (significant), and an update on actions in the legislature that might impact educational policy this year.

After lunch, the first order of business was the consideration of the MSIP 5 Resource and Process Standards. The specific document that was used in the report is attached to this summary. Over 5,509 responses were received during the comment period this fall on the R & PS. Interesting to me, was the fact that only 59 of them addressed our portion of the issue. Most were from Career Education interest groups and teachers who worried that leaving it up to individual districts to determine which of that category of classes would be offered would harm their programs. You can see the breakdown in the attached document.

In essence, as far as I could tell the Fine Arts standards were not changed in any substantial way from the first presentation in the late summer/early fall. There were assurances provided that the Arts were considered a vital and essential part of a well-rounded curriculum, however, none of that was discussed by DESE representatives Jocelyn Strand or Margie Vandeven or the Board members. A telling comment by Dr. Nicastro came out during the discussion of another area and that is “In order to evaluate district performance we will use the Performance Standards and will only turn to the Resource and Process Standards if a deficiency is noted.” Therein lies the only threat to our programs. If a school district can meet all the performance standards then it might not even come to DESE’s attention that minimum resources and processes were not being devoted to adequate arts instruction. However, in practice, that is unlikely to happen for a number of reasons that will become apparent shortly.

At any rate, after the Board questioned Strand and Vandeven carefully about the issues that were up for changes and suggested a few minor adjustments, the MSIP 5 standards were accepted by unanimous vote. After the vote, Rev Archie called for a break and I had a chance to talk to Jocelyn Strand. I had introduced myself before the meeting and now we had a chance to actually talk. I expressed that clearly our members wanted to have districts held accountable for the R & P standards on their basic accreditation rather than on Accreditation with Distinction and noted Nicastro’s comment above. She went out of her way to assure me that districts were currently all
committed to Fine Arts education and with these standards would be for the foreseeable future. She revealed then that she had been prepared for the Board members to question her on this area. She showed me numbers from the school districts annual reports that indicated of the 532 school districts in Missouri some 550 had instruction in Music and a similar number in Art for elementary and middle/junior high schools. The reason that the number was more than the actual tally of districts was that Charter Schools are counted as separate districts. They are not required to have instruction in arts (unless they are a high school), but most did anyway. Her response was therefore that districts interpreted the standards in a very clear way, that they “will offer” the instruction. My final observation for her was that since Performance Standards were ‘king’ during a harsh economic environment, the arts would still be vulnerable to cuts because the actual basic accreditation was not tied to meeting this standard. She nodded at that comment (you can interpret that nod how you wish) and then asked if she could continue to communicate with me. I said yes and urged her to use me as a resource and sounding board assuring her that she would be able to contact me at future board meetings because I would be there.

The rest of the meeting had little or no bearing on our interests, although the standards about meeting individuals with disabilities standards did remind me that students with disabilities should always be in our minds when it comes to accommodations and accessibility.

Those are the events as I recall them. I did take the opportunity to introduce myself to all the board members and give them my new ‘official’ ED business card. Peter Herschend was effusive in his comments on finding a secure place for the arts in school, while acknowledging the problem of finding hours in the day. Rev. Archie was also very supportive, although obviously a bit distracted with the weight of his new duties as chair of the Board. Nonetheless, we had a good conversation about some of his initiatives in KC.

On the actual text in the standards, there are several key spots to consider. First, please note the DESE response to the letters on the Fine Arts R & P Standards.

COMMENT #28: Forty-seven (47) comments were received regarding the development of a fine arts and physical education process standard that defines adequate instruction as a requirement for MSIP-5 accreditation.

RESPONSE: The standards included in Instruction Standards I-1 through 1-5 are designed to define adequate instruction for all content areas. The board agreed to maintain the Resource and Process Standards as a formal rule, accreditation recommendations are based on the performance standards. Adequate instruction in fine arts (art and music) and physical education will be recommended as criteria to be utilized in the determination of the Accredited with Distinction classification level.

COMMENT #31: Eleven (11) comments were received asking that the Resource and Process Standards, particularly fine arts and physical education, be requirements for a district’s accreditation. Two (2) comments were received requested that the standards continue to be used as best practices rather than requirements.

RESPONSE: The board agreed to maintain the resource and process standards as a formal rule, accreditation recommendations are based on the performance standards.

This provides them with some wiggle room, but also commits them to the idea that our areas are an important part of the mix. Almost all districts will be aiming for Accreditation with
Distinction at some point in their growth and so that means they must continue their music and art instruction. While it is disappointing to those of us in the dance and theatre community that our disciplines are not mentioned, I see that as fertile ground for future discussion. In the actual Resource and Process Standards themselves, the verbage is much clearer and quite specific.

2. Each elementary student will receive instruction in art, music, and physical education for a minimum of fifty (50) minutes in each area each week (twenty-five (25) minutes in each area for half-day kindergarten classes). These classes shall be taught by teachers with appropriate certification.

The use of the term “will” is a definite requirement. The use of the imperative ‘shall’ in the requirement as to who shall teach the courses is even more encouraging.

The middle school/junior high standards are also fairly strong.

3. Art and music are scheduled and taught so that all students have access to each for a minimum of one thousand five hundred (1,500) minutes each year.

Note that phrase carefully. This standard references the scheduling of the courses. In order for all students to have access, that seems to imply far more than a token section offering in the schedule. Access demands a reasonable number of opportunities so that a typical series of schedule conflicts could be overcome. This might be fodder for a parent advocate to utilize with a reluctant administration to open up additional sections of a course. Better that than a lawsuit. Unfortunately, the requirement of teachers with certification is not a part of this segment.

High School graduation requirements remain in place, as is. Each student must complete one unit of fine arts.

One comment by Dr. Nicastro made an impression toward the end of the discussion. That was that there would in all likelihood be further modifications of these. So, although passed, the standards still have a certain malleability. That might be the opening that would allow us to include dance and theatre or to add the appropriate certification to the middle school requirement.

After the meeting finished, I did take the opportunity to visit Representative Kent Hampton of Malden, in his Capitol Office. Rep. Hampton wrote a strong letter of support for the importance of required fine arts in schools. I expressed our appreciation for his support and we had a nice conversation about the subject. I came away with the definite sense that he would be a willing ally in our future endeavors.

I appreciated the opportunity to attend the meeting on your behalf. It was an interesting, if not entirely satisfactory experience. However, there is still much to be celebrated about the future of arts education in Missouri.

Should you have questions, please contact me at bmartin@moaae.org.