Agency

Agency: Agency is the capacity to act freely, including making one's own independent choices. While it may seem like policy is something that is done to music educators, teachers always have some degree of control over how they engage with existing policies.

Engaging with Existing Policies:

- The first step to engaging with a policy is understanding its contents. What exactly does the policy require me as a teacher to do? Of particular import is knowing which parts of the policy are optional and which are mandated, including understanding any repercussions for not meeting mandated requirements.

    Example: A policy may require that music educators show evidence of student growth. Before collecting evidence, a teacher might ask: How much evidence is mandated? (Is it from every music student or only from one class?) What types of evidence are acceptable? (Is it only individual assessments or can it be group evaluations? Are written assessments more or less valued than playing assessments?) What happens if a teacher does not produce this evidence?

- A second step is considering what one deems positive and negative about a policy's outcomes. Humans have a tendency to resist change, so it can be tempting to resist any new policy just because it necessitates alterations from existing practices. It's important to have a reasoned argument for why specific aspects of a policy are good or bad. In considering the pros and cons of a policy, music educators might ask:
    - Who created this policy and why?
    - Who, including students from underrepresented or marginalized groups, does this policy benefit, harm, or exclude?
    - What would teaching and learning look like if I fully adopted this policy?
    - How does this policy align with or contradict my own teaching philosophy, including what values and practices I emphasize?

- Once teachers both understand a given policy, including any repercussions for not following it, and have determined its beneficial and problematic aspects, they can choose to what extent they want to implement the policy and to what extent they want to ignore, challenge, or indirectly subvert the policy.

    Example: In reading through a new set of state music standards, a teacher may find practices or ideas, such as composing with technology or musical expressivity, that align with their teaching philosophy but not prevalent in their classroom. Using this policy as a point of reflection, the music educator may innovate their practices. Alternatively, the teacher may find that some parts of the standards, such as limited definitions of composition or an extreme emphasis on music literacy, do not align with their philosophy. If there are no significant repercussions for not enacting these parts of the policy, then the teacher may decide to ignore them.

Creating Policy: Part of having agency involves seeing oneself as a policymaker. Music educators are constantly creating policies having to do with who is admitted into classes and ensembles, requirements for grades, and processes surrounding musical engagements with their school and local communities. Teachers might also enact their agency by talking with administrators about school policies, serving on state music educators boards or standards writing committees, considering politicians' education policy positions when voting, and contacted their elected officials, particularly those on education committees.