

The Midwest Clinic - 2012

Surviving and Excelling in a Small School

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There are certain things that every band program must have in place in order to be successful. You will find no substitute for solid fundamental teaching and playing. However, teaching in a small school does present a unique set of challenges that must be approached correctly in order to ensure that our students still receive the best educational experience possible. In this packet you will find both general and specific recommendations for getting the most out of your small school musical ensembles.

Setting Realistically High Standards

- Too often, small school band directors will make excuses as to why their students “can’t” perform at a high level. We may never play Maslanka’s “4th Symphony” or Respighi’s “The Pines of Rome”, but we can still expect our students to display.....
 - Proper posture
 - Proper hand position
 - Good fundamental tone quality
 - Proficiency in a uniform counting system throughout all grade levels
 - Knowledge of note names and fingerings (do not allow students to write in fingerings)
 - Understanding of musical vocabulary
- Checking for correct fundamentals can easily be overlooked when there are only one or two people on staff. However, you must force yourself to teach proper fundamentals starting with your beginners, and then correct problems that arise the moment that you see them. This approach will ensure a higher ceiling of achievement.
- Require accountability through music pass off assignments that are graded. Utilize individual pass off times to reinforce playing fundamentals. Constantly reiterate individual emphasis on group goals.
- Your students don’t have to play puny and “small” just because they attend a small school. Have your students listen to professional recordings and emulate the sounds that they hear.
- Don’t use inexperience as a crutch. To quote Mark Twain, “All you need in this life is ignorance and confidence, and then success is sure.” Often times, we can make up for the experience that we do not have by working hard and believing in ourselves.

Pedagogical Considerations

- If your school will allow it, split your beginner classes into like instruments. The beginner year is the most important year of band. It is next to impossible for many students to recover from a poor start on their instrument. The more “instrument specific” instruction can be the better.

- Learn to play the instruments that you teach well enough to make a middle school all-region honor band.
- When there is no private lesson staff, brass players must become woodwind and percussion specialists and vice-versa. No one else will teach your students alternate fingerings, natural tuning tendencies, equipment needs, etc. The key to growing top level players is private instruction.
- Invite successful teachers that you trust to watch you teach and offer suggestions for improvement. We should learn to teach the same way that we hopefully learned to play an instrument: constant and quality feedback.
- Find a way to pay guest clinicians to come to your band hall. Most professional players have experience teaching students at every level and are more than happy to spend a day in your band hall. Sometimes, they will even help you for very little pay; all you have to do is ask.
- Listen to good music played by the top collegiate and professional ensembles. We must keep our ears cleaned out if we want to have high ensemble expectations in our own rehearsals and performances.

Program Management

- Band directors wear many hats and can easily get bogged down in their clerical duties. However, band directors should try to do only the things that only band directors can do. Delegate everything else. Train assistant directors, student leaders, and parent volunteers to copy music, arrange chairs, stuff envelopes, update the band Facebook page, etc. Set your expectations, monitor progress, and stay out of the way as much as possible.
- While the small school band director is required to be a secretary, counselor, disciplinarian, and an administrator, the most important job will always be teaching. Make sure that you do not consistently neglect your students to do paper work.
- Organizational Tips
 - Keep a file for every event that takes place throughout the school year. This file should contain copies of informational letters, schedules, logistical plans, and points for improvement for the next time that event will take place.
 - Create folders and folders within folders on your computer to make it easier to find and update documents from year to year. Label documents clearly and concisely.
 - Try to touch every piece of paper that comes across your desk only one time. Dealing with papers the first time you see them will prevent your work space from getting disorganized and will prevent you from missing deadlines.
- Communication Tips
 - Use tools such as mass emails, a band Facebook page, a band website, and text message chains to communicate with your students and parents. Update regularly!
 - Important items such as performance calendars and trip information should still go home by regular mail in addition to emails and Facebook.

- Publicize your group. Send in pictures and captions to local newspapers that describe recent achievements. Invite local newspaper and television reporters to interview your students when an event or achievement calls for it.

Philosophical Approach

Like all professions, philosophical approaches vary greatly in the music education business. Some programs are primarily focused on winning contests while others simply go through the motions. How do we avoid these extremes? What does success look like? Consider these questions.

- What are the students *really* learning? Do they love playing great music? Do they feel bad about themselves if they don't "win" the big one?
- Do you enjoy going to work? If not, what can you do to fix that? Have you given up?
- Do you focus only on the destination or do you take time to enjoy the journey? Do your students enjoy the journey?
- Are you sensitive to those students that "do it all?" Do you come unhinged before you hear the whole story about a conflict with a scheduled rehearsal or performance? Do you look for positive solutions and ways to find positive compromises or do you fly off the handle about every little thing?

The answers to these thought provoking questions will not be the same for every person. If you find yourself not knowing the answer to one of these questions or hundreds more, it is time to pick up the phone or send an email. The minute that we think we have it all figured out is the minute that we should find a different career! Pick the brains of those that you admire and trust!!!

Never forget the important jobs such as teaching students to love music, to respect themselves as a person, to respect others, and to grow up and advocate for our art.

New Diana High School Eagle Band – Program at a Glance

Student Numbers

- Band Membership - Seniors (8), Juniors (10), Sophomores (17), Freshman (19), 8th Grade (27), 7th Grade (38), 6th (45) – 164 total
- High School Student Body – 287
- Middle School Student Body – 237

Class Schedule Set Up

- 6th Grade
 - Flute
 - Clarinet and Saxophone combined

- Trumpet and French Horn combined
- Trombone, Baritone, and Tuba combined
- Percussion
- Students aren't transferred to double reed instruments or low woodwinds until around eighth grade. Following this timeline enables a director to obtain a good sense of a student's work ethic and loyalty to the program.
- 7th Grade Band
 - All instruments meet during one class period.
- High School Band
 - Grades 8-12.
 - All students meet at one time. We are able to do this because the high school and middle school are at the same campus.

High School Rehearsal Schedule (*6th and 7th grade meet almost exclusively during their regular class period*)

- 7:35-8:45 a.m. Monday through Friday during marching season. 7:55-8:45 a.m. during concert season.
- Evening rehearsals are Monday from 7:00-9:00 p.m. through marching contest and as needed to prepare for concert and sight reading contest.
- Sectionals are held before and after school as needed during concert season.
- Music pass off assignments are performed before or after school throughout the school year.

Method Books

- 6th Grade – Essential Elements 2000 (Hal-Leonard Corporation)
- 7th Grade and High School Band – Foundations for Superior Performance (Kjos Music Company)
- All Grade Levels – Supplemental materials as needed designed by directors to meet the needs of the class.

Music Selections

- 6th Grade – Beginning level only. Students will learn three or four full band works during the sixth grade year.
- 7th Grade – Texas UIL Prescribed Music List (PML) Grade 1 (or comparable pieces that are not on the list for non-UIL concerts)
- High School Band – Texas PML Grade 2, 3, and 4. Emphasis is usually Grade 3.

Teaching band at the highest level is a lifelong pursuit. Never stop self-assessing to see where you can improve. There are definitely limitations that come with teaching in a small school. However, we should only accept the actual limitations that exist. Things like the number of students in a school district, the size of a budget, the age and quality of rehearsal facilities, and the number of activities students are involved in will always cause it to feel like a small school. All other limitations such as playing ability, student "buy in" to the program, and musical achievement are self-imposed. We must never "settle" for a mediocre product just because we teach in a small school.