

RECRUITMENT AND BALANCED INSTRUMENTATION

by Vince Corozine

Most successful band programs do not appear by chance but are the result of careful planning, teaching experience, and professional expertise. The three major problematic areas of concern for most band directors are how and when you should enroll new students; how to make students feel successful; and how to achieve a balanced instrumentation.

HOW AND WHEN TO ENROLL NEW STUDENTS

With a plan, recruiting beginning students need not be as problematic a challenge as most band directors tend to believe but one that directors eventually must face.

Let's look in depth at ways to reduce the high drop out rate and techniques to employ for recruiting players who are the key component when addressing solutions to the above concerns.

High Drop Out Rate

Beginning band must be fun and exciting for the students and should build on their self-esteem. Students should enjoy and feel success about the instruments they play.

Research indicates that girls gravitate and are steered more toward playing woodwind instruments (particularly flute), while boys are steered toward brass, saxophone, and percussion instruments. Students should be able to try out a few instruments before making a decision about what instrument to study. Percussionists

should begin on a mallet instrument, not on the drum set. This fact must be clearly stated to both students and parents prior to enrollment in the program.

Enrolling Students

Write letters: Write letters to parents, pertaining to the next year's instrumental music program. Send them in May, in late August write a follow-up letter. It is advantageous to hold a "beginners" meeting in late August or early September, when you display instruments and provide instrument demonstrations at the meeting. To further arouse and sustain interest in the program, the more hand-on activities you can provide, the better the experience is for the parents and students.

Contact Community Resources: Contact a local music store. A store representative can explain and provide written informational material on the various instrument rental plans or on its rent-to-buy plans to the parents to take home to reference. Most music stores offer a three-month rental plan, with minor repairs guaranteed free. For added incentive, some stores provide an option whereby a student may switch to another instrument during this time without extra cost. A user-friendly method for obtaining an instrument is a welcomed opportunity for busy parents having little or no experience in purchasing an instrument. Parents who are involved in a monetary investment are more likely to invest their influence to ensure the student practices.

It is a good idea to have the music store deliver the rental instruments to the school on the first day of school rather than having each parent get them from the store. Parents are hassle free and instruments are safe and secure. This way the teacher will be

sure that each student will know how to assemble his or her instrument correctly and begin in a musical manner. It is not unusual see clarinets and trombones arrive from home with bent slides and keys.

Within the three-month trial period, students should have the opportunity to switch instruments for personal, social, or instrumentation balance. This is an excellent time to assist students who have special needs (braces, wheelchair or physical size) and disabilities accommodations: tenor saxophone verses alto.

If students are having difficulty producing an adequate tone, or having a hard time with physical coordination, a change in instrumentation may be warranted. Just prior to the end of the initial three-month period, the music teacher should send a progress report to the parents of each child, with a recommendation for continuation or instrument modification recommendations.

Seek Out Students: Seek our students who already can read music or play piano or accordion, for example. Contact private music teachers and local conservatories to obtain a list of students who are studying music. You now have a pool of music students from which to recruit. Directors can begin these students on oboe, bassoon, and other specialized instruments. For oboe and bassoon, it is best to select serious-minded students who don't mind sitting alone or working independently.

Just how does a recruitment process work? Here are a few ideas that work successfully. The first idea is suggested by Henry E. Duitman from Dordt College, Sioux Center, Iowa in his "Beginning Band a 'How-To-Do-It' Primer for Those Heterogeneous Classes.

1. Schedule a special day near the end of the school year. Those completing the first year of band perform for and coach the new beginners. The beginners can see how much their friends have learned in only one year. This event motivates the full-year players to be the “big shots” and show the beginners how much they know.

Have the players play a few short pieces and have the beginners sit on the floor next to any instrument that peaks their interested. Let them ask questions of the players they are sitting next to after each song. This special day can really be a fun and memorable experience.

Next, the players get to give the beginners their “first lesson.” This will result in a noticeable excitement and pride in their accomplishments. Preparation for this first lesson, with the players and the music teacher, is a good time to review basic concepts such as breathing, buzzing, and posture.

List of Other Creative Ideas:

- Have pre-beginner classes on recorder for all students in grade four. Students will learn to blow into an instrument, to read notes, count rhythms, and achieve a good playing posture.
- Encourage students to begin private study so they can advance more quickly.
- List a specific number of opening slots for each instrument. For example,
- drums-6, tuba-5, clarinets -15, and so on.

- Have the music teachers in the district test the beginning students. Ask the parents to bring their children to school for one evening.
 - Ask your students to come with three instrument choices in mind.
 - Once seating is full, marked it “closed” and the remaining students have to select another instrument.
 - Demonstrate the importance of having all instruments in the band.
 - Make sure that the student can easily produce a sound on the tested instrument.
2. Another useful approach is to have all beginners play the following instruments during their first year of instruction: flute, clarinet, saxophone, trumpet, baritone horn, trombone, and percussion on drum pads. This opportunity allows the student and the teacher to better assess which students will be successful and advance more quickly.

HOW TO MAKE STUDENTS FEEL SUCCESSFUL

Students, like adults, want to feel successful when they attempt a new skill. It is important to heap praise on those who quickly produce a good sound.

One approach is to let beginning instrumental students play different instruments of choice, and let the music teachers score them on a scale of from 1-10 as follows:

- | | |
|------|--|
| 10-9 | instrument was a natural fit, student got a good sound |
| 8-7 | made a good sound |
| 6-5 | okay, but took sometime to produce a sound |

5or below a physical reason why the instrument doesn't fit (hands too small to reach keys, lack of coordination for percussion, arms too short for trombone slide, lip position interferes with playing flute and trumpet).

Students need to be encouraged and challenged. Quarterly performance exams on their instrument is recommended. Example formats may include the following:

- Grades 7 and 8: Play five major scales from memory-up and back at quarter note = 92.
- Grades 9 and 10: Play nine major scales from memory-up and back at quarter note = 72.
- Grade 11: Play nine major scales in thirds at quarter note = 72
- Grade 12: Play nine major scales in thirds (two octaves where appropriate) in thirds at quarter note = 72.
- Give extra credit for playing melodic minor scales.
- Require that each student memorize a short solo every quarter. This builds confidence, allows the student to focus on tone quality, and frees the student from the printed page.
- Ask percussionists to play rudiments on the snare drum.

Now let's turn our attention to a few suggestions regarding a balanced instrumentation for school concert band. More on achieving balance is discussed in the next section. A balanced instrumentation for a school concert band should consist of the following:

Flutes 1, 2 , Piccolo
Oboe 1, 2 (double English horn)
Bassoon 1, 2, (double Contra bassoon)

Clarinet 1, 2, 3
Eb clarinet, alto clarinet, bass clarinet, contrabass clarinet
Saxophones: alto 1-2, tenor, baritone
Trumpet 1, 2, 3
F. Horns 1,2,3,4
Trombones 1, 2, 3 and Bass trombone
Euphonium (baritone horn)
Tuba
Percussion snare drum, bass drum, mallets, timpani, accessories
String bass

A six-week summer music program is a favorable time for your advanced students to try a second or a third instrument. Directors can switch students to instruments that are needed in the ensemble. Whether your band's instrumentation is stable or suffers periodic loss of players, gaps in part coverage may result. Occasions may arise when you will want students who can play more than one musical instrument. Keep in mind, when beginners take lessons daily for six weeks, they can progress almost as much as they can in a full school year.

Students may try as many instruments as they wish, but it is good to set a goal for the student to work toward, such as learning six new scales, then permit the transfer after the objective is met.

At the end of the first year, students and teachers alike will know what instruments are available and needed for the band. Mostly students will know which instrument they can play more successfully. A positive by-product of this approach is that most students will learn how to read notes and basic rhythms by the end of the first year.

HOW TO ACHIEVE BALANCED INSTRUMENTATION

A dynamic music education program provides its students with an opportunity to listen and perform music that reflects our rich musical heritage. Achieving a balanced instrumentation will provide students with this opportunity.

One approach that has been used successfully in building and maintaining a balanced instrumentation is to establish percentages for each section. The Director should decide how many instruments are needed in each section.

Balanced instrumentation implies that the concert band will have an adequate number of instruments in each section to produce a characteristic band sound.

An organization that is unbalanced (too many alto saxophones, trumpets and so on), will deprive students of the opportunity to hear what a typical band sounds like.

It will help to explain to parents and students that a controlled, balanced instrumentation is like having a sports team with different and valuable playing positions.

Inform the parents and students that percussionists will do lots of mallet and snare drum work and no drum set playing for one full year.

Involve the older and middle school student to demonstrate a few songs for the beginners. It is a good idea to select songs that feature the low brass and low woodwind instruments. Saxophones, flutes and drums are the most popular band instruments. So, hide the saxophones and flutes in the back row and don't feature them.

When planning to switch students from one instrument to another.

- Decide what instruments are needed to achieve a balanced instrumentation
- Ask groups of friends (social aspect) to try to play the French horn as an experiment. Give them special attention and praise if they are able to produce a

good sound. Encouragement works wonders. Students are liable to switch instruments if they are socially comfortable.

A few likely switches are from Trumpet to French horn or baritone horn, from clarinet to flute, oboe, alto and bass clarinet, from trombone or baritone horn to tuba, and from saxophone or clarinet to bassoon.

Allow students to switch instruments only after they are able to play six scales on a particular instrument. Let them achieve something before switching to another instrument.

The more mature students, particularly in the woodwind section, may want to learn multiple instruments so they can play in pit orchestras for theatre productions, where the music often calls for the player to double on two or three different instruments.

Developing secondary instrument players is important for personal exploration by students, to balance the instrumentation of your band, and to increase the variety of your programming.

Thriving band programs really do exist! They exist when band directors work hard to recruit and maintain players.

One particular school district offers the following:

- A ninth grade band for all players
- A tenth through twelfth grade band for all players
- A wind symphony where all students must audition and must study with a professional musician. If a student is selected but cannot afford lessons, then the school district pays for the student's lessons. The Wind Symphony

performs an average of thirty five times per year, and is able to perform music of the highest quality and level of difficulty.

A three-tier band system can exist and does exist when the band director, students, administrators and parents work together to achieve this goal.

Lastly, be sure to point out to your band and to the parents that the secondary instruments are responsible for your band's improved sound. With the recognition and attention accorded secondary instrument players, you will find it easier to switch students from one instrument to another in the future. Balancing or enriching your band's sound through the addition of more low brass sound or tone colors like oboe, bassoon, and French horn, opens the possibility of programming literature that would be ineffective or impossible without them.

When seeking solutions for recruitment and balanced instrumentation, don't be afraid to ask directors of successful band programs for advice. You may just surprise yourself to learn how receptive and willing most directors are when given the opportunity to share their expertise.