

# Opening a New School

## From Beginners to Advanced

Kevin C. Russell, Robert R. Gamez

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Picture this: new head band director, first-year assistant band director, 50 more band students than instruments, tons of boxes and unassembled music stands, no location for summer band camp, construction delays, and students from three diverse band programs. Does that sound fun? Wait, it gets better. There is also a first-year principal, several first-year department heads, and teachers who are new to the school district. It sounds like a recipe for disaster, but became a wonderful experience due to the dedication of teamwork from the faculty and staff. That describes the summer of my opening Gregory Luna Middle School in far northwest Bexar County in the Northside Independent School District. Northside I.S.D. is the sixth largest school district in Texas, with 99 schools and growing. There are 7 high schools, 14 middle schools, 54 elementary schools, 8 specialty schools, and some magnet campuses as well. Northside ISD opens an average of 3 new schools a year. This perspective comes from working in a large district. I am a fifth-year band

director in Northside I.S.D. and have never opened a new school. Let me tell you... opening a new school is something like jumping into the deep end of the pool... before you learn how to swim. A new school is an awesome opportunity and a daunting task. This is what I learned and here are some steps to help you should you have the same opportunity.

After you are hired as the head band director you need to find that person who will work well with you to build a successful program. If your principal allows you to help choose the other director, look for a very hard worker. This is more important than musical abilities as you begin your professional "marriage" with your associate. Many people are musically qualified, but you need that hard worker and someone that you find compatible because

you are about to spend a lot of time together. Robert R. Gamez is the one person that met all of these demands. After his interview I knew that he was the one for the job. I could see the teacher in him, even though he had never taught. Robert also had the dedication and the desire to get the job done. If you don't plan on spending more than "187 days" on your new campus, DON'T OPEN A NEW SCHOOL! Developing a rapport with your colleague over the summer is critical. You do not want to learn the talents of your associate and your new students at the same time. The students should sense that their new directors are on the same page, even if the directors have never worked together.

### **Preparing for the Challenge:**

- Plan, Plan, Plan
- Know your BUDGET \$\$\$
- Always have a Plan "B"

Anything that can be done before school starts (handbook, ordering uniforms, ordering instruments, music, etc.) should be done as early as possible. It's important to tackle these administrative issues so it gives you time to handle the situations that you do not



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anticipate. I know you won't believe this, but things will go wrong. Murphy's Law is alive and well when opening a new school. We were both hired by the middle of May and immediately started working on the bid list for the instruments. Our school district gave us the freedom to select the instruments we



wanted for our program. We then contacted several colleagues who gave us copies of their handbooks so that we could collect information to write our own handbook without reinventing the wheel. By the end of June we had completed our handbook and submitted it to our administration for review. Throughout the remainder of the summer we spent a lot of time at the music store, buying music and method books we would use for the basis of our program.

We contacted the district to find out how much money we had in our budgets. The district allocated monies for different needs, such as equipment, uniforms and supplies. We had a great budget, but in actuality there is really never enough money when opening a new school. To help spend your budget efficiently, you should gather as much information as possible about your students, equipment and supply needs. With the help of our colleagues, we were able to have a fairly accurate instrumentation list of the advanced and intermediate groups by the beginning of the summer break, which allowed us to tailor our spending. One way we saved money was by buying class sets of method books

instead of buying one book per student. This allowed us to purchase a variety of method books so that we would have diverse instruction. Also, don't forget the small things like auxiliary percussion, mouthpiece puller, reeds, etc.; and what budget is allocated for these items. Many districts will require big ticket items be purchased from a different budget than your little ticket items. Our school was built with bond money and this money is often used for different

objectives than your annual budget. Essentially when the school opened we had two different sets of accounts. The bond money was used to get the school open and the annual budget was used throughout the school year. This will vary from district to district so be familiar with your districts policies.

Having a backup plan is important to be able to handle the problems that will arise. In our situation, we were unable to have our summer band camp at the new school. The reason... the school was not finished. Construction schedules for new facilities are "guesses" at best. Fortunately, we were aware of this problem early enough to plan to have our summer band camp at another district middle school. Also, we had not received all of our instruments by the beginning of school, and we had

many more beginning band students than anticipated. "Too many students" is a wonderful problem to have, but still a problem. There were about 250 students enrolled in the band program, with approximately 140 beginners at the start of the school year. No one could have foreseen these complications. We had nineteen euphonium students and we only ordered

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ten euphoniums. You must do whatever it takes to get the instruments you need to start your program. This includes mowing lawns and washing cars to get your fellow directors to loan you instruments. We were also short on some instruments because the manufacturer did not have these instruments in stock. Once again, be patient, and communicate with central office, keeping track of purchase orders so they are aware of what equipment has not been delivered. To this date we are still waiting on certain instruments to arrive. Without the help of the other middle schools, our first year would have been a total flop. The moral of the story... plan, plan, plan and then have a backup plan for each of those plans.

### **Opening Day:**

- Be organized
- Be patient, don't RUSH
- Students' Expectations
- New School PRIDE

If you made it to the first day of school you are mentally and physically ready for spring break. Although many parts of your program may be in disarray, the band hall should look inviting and well organized. There will be a lot of empty cardboard boxes, but do your best to have a clean and neat appearance in your classroom. One way we accomplished this was by decorating the band hall. We took advantage of the free posters offered at the TBA Convention/Clinic, as well as using personal items. Along with the organized appearance you should also be organized with your administrative duties. Remember, things will go wrong, so plan everything well in advance by setting

your calendar and planning major events for the entire school year. Our first scheduled performance was an off-campus outdoor event that was canceled due to bad weather. The event was the district high school pre-U.I.L. marching contest, which every middle school band attends. The students were disappointed because they could not show all of their hard work, and the selections were not appropriate for a holiday concert. We salvaged the student morale by putting on a concert of our own a week later and inviting the parents to an ice cream social in the school's brand new outdoor amphitheater. But we had a bit of bad weather of our own due to the sprinkler system coming on during the concert. Because we were well organized and with the help of our band parents the event was a huge success.

Being organized is a must, but because there are so many things to do it is easy to become overwhelmed. DON'T PANIC!!! Just stay focused and continue to work on your plan. Your schedule will probably get thrown off early in the year, so you have to be patient. We stayed in constant communication with each other, which helped us stay on top of our plan. By the beginning of school, we thought we had about two-thirds of the beginning students placed on instruments. Once school began, we realized that we had placed less than half of the beginning students. We stayed focused, using the first few weeks of the year to demonstrate instruments, test the students for placement, and teach some basic music theory. We were not able to follow the schedule that we had set,

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but we didn't panic. In this situation it is far better to take the extra time to do the job right than it is to force the issue and stay on schedule. Students can always tell if you feel uneasy and stressed; therefore, they start to feel uneasy and stressed. A stressful environment will not allow the students to feel welcome in their new school or make your job any easier, so relax.

Not having enough instruments for our students was a challenge, but nothing is tougher than dealing with differing student expectations from three different band programs. You don't have to change your expectations, but you have to show a great deal of patience and understanding. Because course registration takes place in the early spring before we were hired, we were not able to place the students in our advanced and intermediate groups. One of our groups was comprised of very diverse learning and performing abilities. We had to establish our expectations in a way that did not hold back the strong students, and did not discourage the weaker students. To this day we are still working on developing student expectations, by stressing that it takes every individual to be successful. While expectations have improved, this is still our greatest teaching challenge in opening a new school.

With a new school, everyday is a first time occurrence. (And with that everything needs to be established, including school pride.) School pride starts with the faculty and staff, not the students.

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We made certain that we were visible on campus by taking the opportunity to go to many special events and supporting other programs. Just taking the time to do these things not only showed our students, but also the whole student body that the band directors cared about the school. We also established school pride by creating a band t-shirt that we thought middle school students would be proud to wear. The shirt was a bigger success among all band students, faculty and staff than anticipated. Faculty and staff often wear our band t-shirt on school spirit days, and there is not a school day that goes by that we do not see at least one band student wearing his/her band t-shirt. You don't establish school pride by telling students to be proud of their school. You establish school pride by being the example of school pride.

Opening a new school is a huge task, and in the words of our district fine arts director James Miculka, "Every band director should open a new school... once!" Mr. Miculka was a big help in guiding every step of our endeavor. To avoid major problems you have to work very, very closely with your administrators at central office and school campus. With their help you can maneuver the mountains of paperwork it will take to get what you need. So if the opportunity arises for any of you to open a new school, we hope that our experience will give you a head start on creating your successful band program.

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