

# Building a Successful Band Program in the Inner-City

Ricky Flores

As I begin my tenth year as Director of Bands, I cannot help but to stop and reflect on the journey and the lessons that have been learned along the way. I began my professional career at Harry S. Truman Middle School (Edgewood ISD) and then accepted my current position as Director of Bands at Washington Irving Middle School in the fall of 1999. The process has not been easy but the blessings have been abundant. Lord knows that there have been both mountain and valley experiences along the way. Never in my imagination would I have thought fifteen years ago that I would be addressing the greatest teachers in our great state—Texas Band Directors. My prayer is that the information that I will share in this article will serve as motivation that all things are possible when you choose to believe in your students. It does not matter where kids reside. What matters most is that your band students understand that you believe that they can do what others may state is impossible.

Many have asked why is it that I chose to teach in the inner-city, otherwise known as the “barrio” and my response is quite simple. I am on a mission. For too long

people have made excuses as to why kids such as mine cannot become successful. I am here to challenge every individual and mind set that holds this notion. The fact of the matter is kids that reside in the inner-city need teachers that believe in them. Kids in the inner-city do not need more teachers telling them what they cannot do. We must empower and enable our students to dream big and set their standards high.

In the past seven years our band program here at Washington Irving Middle School has consistently earned the Sweepstakes Award at the Region XII Concert and Sight Reading contest and has been named Outstanding and Best in Class at music festivals across South Texas. In 2002 and 2004 our Honor Band program advanced to the 2C State Honor Band Area Finals. Never had this venture been undertaken by any of the middle schools in our area. The time has come for programs that reside in our state’s inner-cities such as ours to take the challenge and encourage

our kids to reach further than they have ever reached.

Back in 2001, I had no idea what 2C State Honor Band auditions was all about. I then had a lengthy discussion with two of my closest colleagues. They shared with me that *it was time*. I remarked,

“Time for what?” They remarked, “It is time to take your kids to the next level. What’s the matter Mr. Flores, don’t believe in your students?” Talk about a challenge. Needless to say, in the spring of 2002

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we placed first at Regionals and advanced to Area auditions en route to the 2C State Honor Band Finals. In 2004, we lost the tie breaker to advance to the 2C State Honor Band Finals. Make no mistake, in 2006, we will be back. Our Honor Band is tentatively scheduled to record at the Morton H. Meyerson Symphony Center in Dallas, Texas in the spring of 2006. I sometimes think to myself, “Life would become so much easier if we were to do the minimum that our job requires.” But you see—I like to sleep at night. I care way too much for my kids to

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not give them my absolute best. When my kids leave our band program I want them to have the tools to become successful not only in band but in every aspect of their life.

There is no magical solution to the success that we have enjoyed here at Irving. Building a successful band program in the barrios of San Antonio requires much dedication and sacrifice on both the students' and teachers' parts. I have been blessed to have worked with such Assistant Director of Bands as Rene Cortez (entered into rest on April 12, 2005) and currently with the newest addition to our band program—Mrs. Joslyn Munoz. It is imperative that we work together for the common good of students. My assistant director and I place no limitations or boundaries on our students. We hold that every student that enters our classroom has the same opportunity to become successful. Believing for the best in people usually brings the best out of them. Mark Twain once remarked, “Keep away from people who try to belittle your ambitions. Small people always do that, but the really great make you feel that you, too, can become great.” The question then becomes, “Do you believe the best in your students?” You can beat the odds by letting your students know that you genuinely care for them. Once your students can sense that you are being “real” with them they will then begin to open up and receive what you have to offer.

It is imperative that we create winning relationship with our students. Stephen R. Covey stated that “Win/Win” concept is a frame of mind and heart that constantly seeks mutual benefits in all human interactions. “Win/Win” is based on the paradigm that there is plenty for everybody and that one person's success is not achieved at the expense or exclusion of the success of others. When we help others we help ourselves. Working together increases the odds of

winning together. Take the time to invest in the people that you work with. Investing in others is the most noble and productive thing we can do. Whatever we can do to help others makes the world a better place. The relationships that you form with your students are critical to the success of your program. Young people in this generation simply want to know you genuinely care.

I encourage all young Texas Band Directors to find a mentor. Find someone with a wealth of experience and someone who is willing to tell you the truth. I thought I knew a little something about band directing when I graduated from Texas Lutheran University in 1995. In the spring of 2002, I met Charles Arsuaga through my Assistant Director of Bands Rene Cortez. Mr. Arsuaga was hired as my clinician and consultant for that spring semester. I had already been teaching for a period five years. After I conducted the concert march, Mr. Arsuaga commented, “Is this your first year teaching son?” I then replied, “This is my fifth year teaching sir.” He then stated, “No, I really think that this is your first year.” How is that for positive reinforcement? Did I mention that this was our introduction to one another? At this point, I handed him the baton and pressed play on my video camera and the rest is history.

Look for directors in your area that you respect and admire and observe their band programs. Find out what works and why they have become successful. Be willing to try new approaches to your teaching. No matter what—never, ever stop learning. I have learned many teaching strategies not only by attending the annual Texas Bandmasters Association and Texas Music Educators Association conventions, but I have learned from directors such as Richard Gonzalez (Driscoll Middle School, Northeast ISD, San Antonio, Texas) and Bernard Rosenberg (Frank Tejada Middle School, Northeast ISD, San Antonio, Texas), who have

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been named as Honor Band Finalists in their respective classifications.

Never lose your passion and desire for what you do. Ask lots of questions. The person who asks the right questions learns the most (Lee Boyd Montgomery can attest to this statement). Learning begins with listening. Understanding someone properly involves learning

from them and learning from someone properly involves not only challenging oneself but changing as well. Growth cannot take place without change. My attitude is that each director I meet has the potential to teach me something. When we help others we help ourselves. People who learn the most are the ones with a teachable attitude. While it is wise to learn from experience, it is wiser to learn from the experiences of others. Make learning your passion and give yourself permission to make a few mistakes in the process. Sometimes my wife Connie and I sit and watch some of my early teaching videos and just have ourselves

a good laugh. Sometimes my wife can be just as tough as my clinician. At the same time, it is great to see the progress from ten years ago. Do not take yourself so seriously all of the time. Take time to laugh and most importantly to live. Teach every day as if it were your last. How would your kids remember you if today were the last day of your life? What would they say at your viewing ceremony? Did you have any impact on their life? Was the funeral home overflowing because of the lives that you so richly blessed?

John C. Maxwell, *Winning with People*, holds that there are four things that we must do in order to produce successful organizations. I have taken these

four principles and made them work in my favor. First, we have a responsibility to motivate our students.

When you are doing what you love no one has to motivate you. Passion drives perfection. If you do not care about your assignment then it is unlikely that you will succeed. The highest achievers in any profession are those who do it because of passion and not because

of duty or profit. Do not waste your life in a job that does not express your heart. As Thomas Jefferson stated, "A candle loses nothing when it lights another candle." When we share with one another we lose nothing. We possess an awesome responsibility in that every day we have the ability to lift a child to a higher level of success. Secondly, we must mentor our students. Get to know your students and they will do anything for you. Give students a bit of your time and it will go a long way. Thirdly, we must model for our students. Children in this generation are hungry for positive

role models. You never truly understand the impact that you have on a child until many years later. Take the time to plant positive seeds into the lives of your band members. Lastly, we must multiply ourselves among our students. You would be surprised how many of your band students want to be like you. I am reminded of the time when two of my students asked me for an interview during my lunch time. Apparently, their English teacher had assigned the students to write an article concerning their real life hero. I was humbled when I read the papers that my kids had written about me. Can I share with you that I had been having a tough couple of weeks and when I read

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my kids papers I provided me the strength to go on? Your band kids are looking to YOU for inspiration and guidance. Challenge yourself and your students. You have nothing to lose and everything to gain.

Our band students work diligently for us because they understand they we always have their best interest in mind. What never ceases to amaze me is the loyalty and commitment of our students. Everyone has a sense of responsibility to the program. We expect the best from our kids; they expect the same from us as their directors. My Pastor (Rick Hawkins, Family Praise Center) once stated, "You get from life what you expect. If you go through life expecting nothing, then the end result is ultimately nothing." The bottom line is that we must change our vocabulary. We must begin to realize that success comes in "cans" and not in "cannots". Students just need someone that they can trust and someone that they can believe can get them to that next level. Success never comes without a price. If it cost you nothing then it will mean nothing. Sacrifice is the name of the game. So if you desire positive change in your band program, then get ready to sacrifice.

As I reflect on the successes that I have experienced during my last ten years in the inner-city (barrios) of San Antonio, Texas, I would be unwise to overlook those men that God has strategically placed to speak

into my professional life. Men such as Lee Boyd Montgomery Jr. (Retired: Texas Lutheran University, 1990), Charles Arsuaga (clinician), Rene Cortez (Previous Assistant Director of Bands: Entered into rest on April 12, 2005), Alfred Esquivel (retired), Robert Quintanilla (active), Adan Salazar (retired), Joe Castellano (retired), Tom Rhodes (RBC Music Company), and Billy Harrell (Region XII Executive Secretary) have been instrumental to my success. These men have so graciously given of their time and talent and for that I am eternally grateful. I would also like to thank God for my beautiful wife Connie and our son Little Ricky. Without the support of my family, I would not be able to do what God has commissioned for me to do. Most importantly, I would like to thank my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ for taking a little poor boy from the barrio such as myself and blessing me in the manner in which HE has. I stand before you as a miracle. If God did it for me, HE can do it for you. I challenge all of you Texas Band Directors to teach with passion. Do as President Woodrow Wilson once stated, "You are not here merely to make a living. You are here in order to enable the world to live more amply, with greater vision, and with a finer spirit of hope and achievement."

Success To You All.

*Ricky Flores has been the Director of Bands at Washington Irving Middle School for the past six years. During his tenure the band program has consistently earned Sweepstakes at the Region XII Concert and Sight Reading Evaluations. In 2002 and 2004, the Honor Band Program at Irving became a Regional/Area Finalist in 2C State Honor Band auditions. The program has also consistently earned "Best in Class" at the American Classics Band Festivals and has been named "Outstanding" at the Texas Lutheran University Band Festivals for the past three years. In addition, in 2003 and 2005, the Honor Band accepted an invitation from State Senator Leticia Van De Putte to perform at the Capitol Rotunda in Austin, Texas during their legislative sessions. In the spring of 2004, Mr. Flores was awarded the "HEB Excellence in Education Award" in the "Rising Star" category for teachers with less than ten years of classroom experience. Mr. Flores earned his Bachelor of Arts in Sociology and a Bachelor of Arts in Music Education at Texas Lutheran University and a Master of Education from Schreiner University in Kerrville, Texas. He has been married for the past six years to his wife Connie and together they have been blessed with two year old son "Little Ricky."*

*Mr. Flores writes that it has been a tremendous blessing for him to work with such fine young people who are dedicated to excellence not only in music but in their daily lives. With continued hard work and dedication Mr. Flores is certain that the future of the band program here at Irving MS will continue to let its light shine.*