

When They Are ALL Beginners

Starting a new band program in an established school

Pat Autry

I've had a unique experience this year; well, at least it's been new to me! I started a band program in an established AA school. In fact, the school has had tremendous success in many other areas including academics, athletics, and choir; but there has been no band program—until now.

I have to say, I thought I was in a unique situation. But I've discovered through the course of the year that there are many A, AA, and even AAA schools in Texas that do not have band programs. I've also discovered that even though they may have been around for many years, some band programs in small schools are still struggling to grow and succeed. So I thought I'd share what seems to have worked for us.

If I had to sum up how to start a band program, I would have to say get community support. The band program came about in Gunter because the community demanded it. They demanded it consistently over time until the school board and administration listened and took steps to establish a band. That means they have supported the program financially—in personnel, facilities, equipment, and more.

Bands are expensive. So without the community's desire for a band and the support of the community the program, it would not exist.

Of course, there are many other key ingredients to starting a successful program. Here are some things that have worked for me:

RECRUITING, RECRUITING, RECRUITING! Prior to my becoming the band director, a part-time director had been there for two years and there were about 35 band students in grades 6-12. So, when I came on board in May 2006, I started recruiting immediately. I recruited 5th graders for 6th grade beginner band. I recruited 6th, 7th, and 8th graders who wanted to be in band. I recruited high school students too.

I organized grade level student assemblies to talk about band and invited them to complete a survey about their activities and thoughts

about band. I asked students to indicate their interest in joining a band ranging from 0-10: 0 for no interest in band, 5 for take it or leave it, and 10 for you can't keep me away. This part of the survey was a key component because it gave me a written record of their thoughts. Can you imagine if I had asked the students who were interested to visit with me after the assembly? I might have had one or two, but it was MUCH more effective this way. I took those surveys to teachers and asked which kids were not involved in other activities. I looked for students who had been in band in other schools before moving to Gunter. I looked for students who said they were VERY interested.

Lots of students signed up. We started the year with about 85 students in the program, more than double the prior year's



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numbers. I expect that number to grow to 110 or more next year.

The 6th-11th grade students who wanted to be in band started their band experience with private lessons in the summer. This allowed them to be far enough along on their instruments to join the band at the appropriate grade level. I have had some “older” beginners progress quickly in the past. I am still surprised at how consistently well these students did. They were successful because they were excited about being a part of the program and they practiced!

Another part of the success of the program was to make it very REAL to everyone as fast as possible. We bought REAL marching percussion equipment and became a REAL marching band playing at the pep rallies and football games with REAL cheers and cadences and even a REAL fight song. Think about it—with no band, fans had been listening to a taped recording of a fight song for twenty years or more. It was not uncommon for me to see people crying when we played at those first pep rallies and football games!

I remember one game when the band was playing the fight song after the team scored. I looked over at the crowd who should have been cheering loudly for the touchdown; but, they were all just STARING at the band! I think it took awhile to get used to something so new.

We didn't have real band uniforms so we had to make do with black pants and polo shirts. It was difficult to get a small, inexperienced group of students ready to perform on Friday nights, but the visibility—making it REAL to everyone—generated incredible excitement and much support for the band program.

Another idea for getting off to a good start is starting the students off RIGHT. I have worked very hard this year on the fundamentals—good posture, breath support, embouchure, tone, intonation, listening, balance, blend, and style. I've worked

on this continuously in band classes and with individuals. We have brought in some private lesson teachers and master class “instrument experts” to generate some excitement about excellence. There is no substitute for hearing a really great performer play a difficult passage from a solo or etude with great tone quality and musicianship! This can really challenge the students to work harder for better personal results. Without this proper foundation, success will continue to be elusive.

One of the most rewarding parts of this whole experience is seeing a group of high school students, many who had really not found a place to “fit in” at Gunter High School, find a place to thrive. These students were walking around school without a group. Some of these good kids had even begun “running with the wrong crowd” just to find a place to belong. For several, band has become that place of safety that can help students reach their potential in the weird world of high school. It has been a real blessing for me to see those students grow into being better players and better people!

So right now, the excitement is building for next year. Some of our goals are to do a REAL half time show and compete in UIL Concert, Sight Reading, and Marching Contests. We are providing scholarships for students to go to band camps this summer as well as starting leadership training and a private lesson program. Next year when the Gunter HS Tiger Band marches onto the field, they will be wearing REAL band uniforms!

Pat Autry is the Director of Bands at Gunter High School, an AA school in Region 25. During his 16-year career, Pat has taught in A, AA, AAA, C and CC schools, including 11 years at Whitesboro High School. Bands under his direction have performed in Washington, D.C. and Orlando, Florida and have competed at the state level in concert and marching contests. Pat is a member of TBA, TMEA, TMAA, and is a charter member of ATSSB. He, wife Sharon, children Brittlea, Crislynn, and Davis reside in Frisco, Texas.