

Creating Success for the Entire Band Program

Jennifer Dillard

It is hard to give a brief overview of something that, in fact, is far from brief. I hope this article will help get the “juices flowing” in your planning process with regards to your Non-Varsity Bands. How much do you think about the “Majority” of your program, your Non-Varsity Bands?

So often, it is easy to speak of your Non-Varsity groups as though they are the minority, when in reality, they are the majority! Several factors are vital in understanding your NV groups: who you are working with in regards to personalities and abilities; nurturing, connecting with and motivating the individual; utilizing your staff; organizing your daily grind and curriculum; and lastly, successful programming. Needless to say, the task is not a simple one, but a multifaceted endeavor that can be trying and amazingly rewarding, nevertheless.

Getting the most out of your NV groups takes some initial diagnosis. I like to call it, “The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly.” Traditional NV bands are often made up of students that want and strive to be in the top band, but don’t necessarily have the skill set to be there or are promoted from another band (8th grade). Sub NV bands can be entirely different as well. Most obvious, Sub NV

students are missing a conceptual section of knowledge about playing their instrument. Most students are blissfully unaware of their deficiency, love band and want you to know it! On the flip side of this, you have the students that are unaware of their deficiency, disgruntled about their placement, and want you to know it. If you are fortunate to have multiple Sub NV groups, you will realize these are the hardest to diagnose. Many times, these are the students that are missing the largest conceptual chunks about playing their instrument and do not truly understand their deficiency. If you have 8th graders in these groups, they have never really pushed themselves to become better players and many have been pushed by their parents to stay in band. These students often have an apathetic approach to band in general.

So now we know what we are dealing with, how do we combat the many personalities? The most crucial part of our job, first and foremost, is nurturing the “Individual”. It is our responsibility to build a positive classroom environment in which we can then build a positive relationship with each individual. I encourage you to ask yourself the question, “Do your students know they are important to you?” Before any groundbreaking teaching can happen, you must first build positive rapport, trust, and acceptance with each child. Directing a band is not just teaching music. For most NV students, they lack many of the social and organizational skills of your top band students. Band directors and teachers alike, have a mammoth job of filling the gap. We not only teach music, but also teach our

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students how to be productive, polite, and respectful individuals.

Once you have connected with the students on an individual level, then and only then, can you begin to reteach and retrain. Find ways for the individuals in your NV groups to shine. Find ways to make what I call “daily deposits”. Each child is their own bank, if you will, and it is your job as their director to build up their savings. While it can be easy to make a “good” deposit, it is equally easy to make a withdrawal, so proceed with caution. Instead of focusing on what they cannot do, rather focus on where you want them to go and then guide them in the process. Positive reinforcement is a must when dealing with NV students. Working with your NV groups is no easy task. So often we are overwhelmed with what they don’t know. Keep a basic formula in mind: praise, challenge, evaluate, and praise again. This process is a perpetual cycle. Find something good in what they played, challenge them to then do some part of it better, evaluate and then praise them again. You will soon find they are eager to please and will work harder than ever for you. Again, it comes down to each individual.

Utilizing your staff is the next piece of the puzzle. If you are fortunate to have more than one director on staff, it is important to discuss how to utilize each person throughout the day. Team teaching, in my opinion, is key. Utilizing and planning your rehearsals in a fashion where each staff member is either pulling students or splitting the rehearsal is key. If you also have the luxury of space, consider splitting rehearsals

for a few days each week. You will quickly find massive amounts of improvement in a shorter amount of time.

Find a way to connect with every individual student each week—some how—some way. At Knox, we have 260 band students in the 7th and 8th grades. Sectionals start with our Varsity and NV band the second week of school and then our Sub NV band the first week of November, once Region auditions have concluded. Now remember, we are only two directors, but with careful planning, we are able to reach three full bands each week in sectionals...priceless! For example, you may have to utilize the other director during band class each Monday to do a saxophone sectional to fit everyone into a sectional time slot. Be creative in your planning; your students are worth it!



Each director in a given program must communicate and collaborate. Be sure everyone is on board with the same clear expectations. Terminology and vocabulary must be consistent from director to director and band to band for your NV groups to be served well. Another consideration to keep in mind is, “Who teaches the NV group?” Many times the director of the NV groups is the director with 0-5 years of experience. It is important that the young directors of these groups are just as well cared for, as the groups they teach. Mentorship is key!

With NV bands, expectations must be clear from the beginning. NV bands need daily guidance with the little things that top band students take for granted, such as: entering the band hall, the start of class, rehearsal etiquette, instrument procedures, etc.... Be structured, consistent, and hold everyone to the same

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high standards. Directors must remember that NV students are future varsity students. Teach them to take ownership in their program and they will start to do things for themselves. Self-sufficient students equal happy directors and a lot less stress.

Take opportunities to speak about their future in band, often. Just as you would talk about college being a natural progression with your own kids, speak about band promotion and the high school band as a natural progression. NV students will be less likely to decide another route when they know you have a vested interest in their future and how they perceive themselves as musicians.

Curriculum for your NV groups must be aligned with the top. Teach with the concept of 3rd feeds 2nd feeds 1st. Plan your curriculum keeping the end result in mind. Daily drill should be similar throughout the entire program, but with varying degrees of difficulty.

The following skills should be addressed in each of your NV rehearsals on a daily basis: tonal concepts and development, rhythmic reading and writing, articulation, key awareness and mastery, scales and scale patterns, and sight-reading. Time management is key to making this all work. For example, do only 2-4 measures of a rhythm line to address a deficiency in your group. An exercise doesn't have to be long in order for it to address the needs of your students. Keep rehearsals moving, vary your activities, and don't get bogged down. Supplemental material is a must for NV groups. Don't be afraid to write an exercise that will better serve the deficiency of your group. Explain the "Why" of what we do each day. The "Why" is just as important as the "What" we do. Teach students

to analyze what they do and you will create critical listeners in the process.

Programming for your NV groups can be a challenging task. Grade 1 doesn't automatically mean the selection is appropriate for every NV band. You

must do your research! First and foremost, find the strengths and weaknesses of the ensemble and individual player. Considerations in your selection process should also include: meter, key, range, style, articulation, instrumentation, and percussion. Find pieces that can feature a section or individual in your ensemble. This is a great way to reward and motivate your students. Find a selection that will allow the entire band to sound their best. Be careful not to overload your students' circuits with too many demands. For example, if you decide to tax them in the technical department, make it in

a comfortable range for them to do so. Be cautious of divided parts, especially in your Sub NV groups. Support in numbers builds confidence. Consider percussion parts for your group. Are they active or very limited? Find other performance opportunities to supplement your percussion section, for example with a percussion ensemble.

In our age of "technology at your finger tips," it is easy to pull up a professional recording in a split second; however, these recordings are not always accurate. Rely, most often, on the score itself. Keep in mind programming for UIL vs. the Spring Concert is very different. UIL contest is not the time to push the envelope for your NV groups. There have been times where groups could have been successful if more

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consideration was put into the selection of their program. If you are in doubt, ask for advice from a mentor. Spring Concerts, on the other hand, are a great time for students to be challenged in new ways without feeling the added pressure of a contest rating or trophy. Students will be happy to take on more risk, especially if they have been successfully guided before. At the end of the day, making kids successful and inspiring a love for music is our business!

In closing, be that teacher you loved and looked up to. Teach with enthusiasm each and everyday. Your students deserve your best!

This article is based on the clinic presented by Jennifer Dillard and Susan Meyer at the 2011 TBA Convention/Clinic.

Jennifer Dillard recently completed her sixth year as Director of Bands and tenth year at Knox Junior High School in The Woodlands. Prior to being appointed Director of Bands, she served as an assistant director under Charlotte Royall for four years. Jennifer is in her eleventh year as an educator with her previous appointment at Blocker Middle School in Texas City under Donnie Owens.

Under Mrs. Dillard's tenure, the Knox Bands have received consecutive Sweepstakes ratings at the UIL Concert & Sightreading Contests and have earned distinction as "Best In Class" at various regional concert festivals. The Wind Ensemble was also selected as a "National Winner" by the 2009 Mark of Excellence National Wind Band Honors Project. Most recently, the Wind Ensemble was named a 2009 CCC TMEA State Honor Band Finalist.

Mrs. Dillard has a Bachelor of Music Education from Sam Houston State University where she was a student of Matthew McInturf. She was the first recipient of the Fisher Tull Endowed Scholarship and served as principal flute. During her summers, Jennifer serves on the staff of the Sam Houston State University Junior High Band Camps where she teaches flute and lectures in conjunction with the "Teaching Middle School Band" professional development series.

Mrs. Dillard is a member of TMEA, TBA and TMAA. She resides in The Woodlands with her husband Jerriald, who is the Percussion Specialist at Oak Ridge High School, and their three year old daughter Elizabeth.

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