

Creating Your Environment. Creating Your Success.

Tom Harrington

Results. There are many days when it seems like the results are the only thing that's really important. We have great expectations on us. Each one of us feels the pressure to create a successful program at our school and success always seems to be the driving force for how we shape our environment.

The experiences we have over the years help make us a bit wiser and hopefully better. I have had the good fortune to open two schools as a head director. Each time I was able to avoid mistakes because of my past experiences. Then in 2012 we re-opened my current school because of a massive boundary shift. This created an opportunity to try out some new ideas I had for improving the environment in my band, and see what impact it would have on our success. It was time to put people first and see what would happen.

Have a Plan

Remember when you were in college and your professors talked about having a philosophy? Well, if you haven't created one, now is a great time to do so. Here is mine.

I want my kids to:

- ***be excited and happy to be in band***
- ***love music***
- ***like playing well***

For me, this came from a deliberate plan to create a specific environment in my band hall. What do I want my band to look like? How do I want my students to treat each other? How do I want it to sound?

Your philosophy should also have a plan on how to interact with

your administration, school faculty, parents, and students, as well as for your personal growth.

Administration and Faculty

I don't think any one thing can lead to a successful environment, so allow me to begin with building your relationship with your boss. Do your best to be knowledgeable of the operation of your school. Understand the master schedule and be ready to help problem solve if your principal asks for help. Create trust with your principal and administrative team, and foster a relationship with them. Know the names of their children and be interested in them as people. Learn what is important to them and keep that in mind when making requests. Don't just go to them when you have a problem; and when you do, have possible solutions ready to go. Be deliberate about creating a positive opinion others have of you in the building. Also, brag on your band kids. Invite faculty to the band hall to be an audience when you have a success to celebrate. Your kids will love the attention, and so will your principal. Above all, they must know you are in it for the right reason. You can focus on being successful as long as your administrators understand you are working to make kids successful and not resume building.

Band Staff

Your job is to keep your staff on the same page, but it's also to nurture a positive work environment for them as well. Start the year with social time before the first day. Once the year gets going, it's hard to create a relationship

that wasn't there to begin with. The better the work environment for your staff, the better their attitude will be in front of the kids, and the more they will stay on message.

Lead and be a solid person. Be someone they can count on to do the right thing. Be first to work if possible and model how you want them to treat students. Encourage their loyalty to the program. Ask their opinion and listen to them. Support them, especially in front of others. Be their mentor and do your best to treat them like you want your principal to treat you and your program.

Parents

Winning over parents is actually very easy. Appreciate their time, treat their children well, and communicate what is going on in your band to them. In my situation, we have limited opportunity for face time with 5th grade students, and there are six outstanding elective choices for them to choose from. When parents are waiting at soccer practice or after church youth night, they talk about school. Parents of younger students are constantly picking the brains of other parents to find out what quality activities there are in middle school to choose from. Parents sign their kids up for band because they want their child to be in an activity and get some music along the way. But above all, they want their child to feel successful, accepted, happy, and to be around good kids. Be deliberate in how you treat parents as well as how you treat their children. One frustrated parent on Facebook can do lasting damage

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to your reputation. Conversely, happy parents can be great ambassadors for your program.

Students

All decisions for your program must begin and end with keeping the well-being of your students in mind. They are the purpose for the program. The reason we reach for success is to provide it for the students. Treat your students well. In my community, there are many awesome activities besides band where kids can get involved. Many parents have their children hopping from one activity to another. Band can be seen as too involved, too time consuming, too rigorous, and too expensive. We will lose them to something else if we are not providing enough engaging moments. Middle school directors remember: our number one job is to get our students to the high school band. This however, does not mean your goal is to make band easy, but rather a rich activity in their lives. Band is most effective for its students when it is done well. Every part of your program should be at a high level, inside and out. They should see value in being a part of the band. This is a critical key to retention.

Individual musicianship should be the backbone of your program

“To have a better band, develop better players”. These wise words are from my friend Brian Merrill and while this may seem obvious, it is as underappreciated as it is true. All great band programs encourage the individual musician. Never miss an opportunity to celebrate a student’s success publicly. Encourage students to play in front of each other often and define your expectations of how they should respond to each other positively. I believe a person fundamentally changes for the better in the process of learning how to practice and achieve musically. Students become invested in the program and are more likely to behave better and work harder. We know that success encourages success, so they motivate others to play well. They will rehearse better and probably march better also. They even may become better students in school. So besides the obvious benefit of playing well and helping the band sound better, you are helping to create outstanding young people while improving your environment.

Appreciate their time and be appropriate in all areas of your life with students. Never use innuendo with anyone

and avoid sarcasm even with your older students. You are trying to establish a positive environment in your band hall where students feel safe. When you foster a positive environment students from all demographics will thrive.

Keeping yourself on track

I think it is important to remember this: I will have a better band if I am a better teacher, and I am responsible for what my band sounds like. Spend some time identifying your deficiencies then work to fill those gaps. Go to conventions and go to the clinics. Put yourself in the company of other positive, success-minded teachers. Have a mentor. Have clinicians whom you respect come to your school, and listen to them. Visit other schools when possible and keep a notebook of what you learn. Do your best to become the best musician possible. Get excited about learning to teach and in the process your job will become much more fun.

So yes, success is important. But it’s important how you define success to your community. As we just saw at the area and state marching contests, there are a lot of great bands in Texas. Success happens every day. Remind them how fun it is to learn drill or music, and doing it together. Speak in terms of playing for your audience more than you talk about pleasing judges. Program music they will like and talk about how fun it is to play for each other and celebrate small successes. Art doesn’t only happen in performance; it’s just as fulfilling when it happens at home in your band hall. When you take care of the individuals in your band and nurture the student musician, you are fostering an environment where students are happy to achieve. They are ready for success.

Tom Harrington has been the band director at Spillane Middle School in the Cypress-Fairbanks ISD since it opened in the fall of 2005. He started teaching in the Spring ISD in 1990 as the assistant at Twin Creeks Middle School. In 1997, he moved to Cypress-Fairbanks where he became the band director at Dean Middle School until 2005. While at Dean, he was named the 2003 Teacher of the Year and again at Spillane in 2011. In 2012, he was added to the CFISD Wall of Fame. Mr. Harrington’s bands have earned numerous UIL Sweepstakes and Festival Awards. In 2009 and 2015, the Symphonic Band at Spillane advanced to the area level of the state CCC honor band competition as well as being named as a Commended Winner in the National Wind Band Honors Competition in 2014 and 2015. In 2006, he was named as a member of the TBA Board of Directors serving as president in 2011-12. In addition, he has been a conductor at the Sam Houston State University Band Camp since 1998. He has been a member of both TBA and the TMEA since 1986 and is a member of the Alpha Chapter of Phi Beta Mu as well as TMAA.