

Developing and Implementing a Marching Band Fundamentals Program

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The process of implementing a marching band fundamentals program can be daunting. We've all gone down the road of teaching the students to play in place, teaching drill without music, and eventually becoming frustrated when the band doesn't sound good when we ask students to do both simultaneously. In reality learning to play and move is a completely new skill for most students. It's not comfortable, it's not easy, and it really doesn't make a whole lot of logical sense. Most musical instruments are not designed to be played while moving. Therefore, we must approach the fundamental development just as a middle school director approaches a 6th grade beginner class. The students are "beginners" of marching while playing and need a logical progression that layers their skill development.

The first step in beginning band is teaching students to sit properly in a chair. Correct hand position, breathing structures, tone production, articulation, flexibility, technique, and music literature eventually follow. The marching training can follow the same progression. Students should learn how to stand correctly with correct hand position and instrument carriage, followed by a definition of leg shape moving forward and backward, and definition of the initiation and completion of movement. These concepts are the basis of the visual fundamentals program and should be the major focus early on. Just

as a student must sit up and use proper hand position in beginner band, a student must stand correctly and use proper horn carriage when learning to move and play. The basic fundamentals are **non-negotiable** and are continually emphasized with early skill development.

The next step is a movement-based approach. This can be very intimidating to most band directors. Students need to learn to use their bodies through movement development. The implementation of basic dance fundamentals pays great dividends with marching technique and musical expression. Simple plié, relevé, and tondué dance exercises explored each day help the students learn proper balance and postural techniques. Many local dance studios are happy to come in and work with students, or searching for basic movement exercises on *Youtube* can be an answer. Many students in our band programs have grown up with dance. A simple *Youtube* video demonstrated and taught by a student to the rest of the group can be enough to begin the movement-based training. While working on these exercises, understand perfection is not the goal. The development and understanding of movement is the ultimate goal leading to better control, flexibility, strength, and presence. This process takes time, but eventually students gain balance control and develop the ability to play on the move with much more confidence.

As you begin to work through the visual side of the program, you must also begin to develop and define your musical sound. As we begin to work on the music side of things, students are set up in an arc form. All of the visual details matter in this form. The arc is always symmetrical based on the mid-point and intervals between all of the students are equal. It is important that students start to realize that there is importance in the details. This will help their level of visual awareness in the drill. The arc allows us to change the listening environment from the traditional concert band set-up. As the listening environment in the marching band is constantly changing, it is important to push students outside of their comfort zone from the beginning. Many times, they will feel like they are playing all by themselves. This is a great opportunity for students to address individual playing issues and develop confidence playing in the full ensemble.

The fundamental exercises that are used outside with the marching band are many of the same that are used inside. Long tones, technique, articulation, and timing should all be addressed in the music fundamental program. There are many great exercises that address all of these concepts and any will work for the marching ensemble. Volume production is a concept that should also be taught during this music time. It is important that students are being

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asked to perform simple exercises at different volumes so that they are able to replicate that within the music. This can be an uncomfortable process for a lot of directors. Many students will not sound their best at louder volumes when you begin this part of your fundamental program. Remember, they also did not sound their best when they started working on articulation or technique. A large volume of air into the instrument with no tension in the body is a difficult concept for most students and will take time to work through.

The merging of the visual and music program is the key to success of any marching band. Realizing that students are never standing still on the field, it is imperative to have them play and move early on as much as possible. While rehearsing in the horn

arc, students should be asked to marc-time and perform step-outs almost immediately. Having them stand still and perform an exercise as a reference of what it should be, and then having them marc-time and perform the same exercise trying to replicate what it sounded like when they are still is a great way to introduce moving in the arc. Students should also play as soon as possible in the visual block. Taking simple visual exercises and adding music fundamentals is invaluable. Adjust either the visual or music phrase so that the two exercises match and have students perform visual and music fundamentals simultaneously. "Tracking" musical excerpts from the show in a visual block is another great way to make students more comfortable with playing and moving. Sometimes the battle is not the "dot," but rather getting them to play and move their feet in time. Using the entire field grid and varying the exercises will heighten students' visual and musical awareness. Continue to put emphasis on the fundamental development rather than perfect execution of the exercise. When the students begin to achieve without concentration, change the exercise.

The marching band fundamental program is a lot to tackle. Having a curriculum plan and being patient is key. Most of us would never start a concert band rehearsal without spending time on daily drill. Marching band must be approached the same way. Continue your visual and music fundamental program the entire season and push students past their comfort zone. Remember, learning to play and move is a new concept for students entering the high school band. They will not be great the first time, but with persistence and fundamental focus they will meet your expectation.

Brent Biskup is the Director of Bands at Flower Mound High School in Dallas. He began his teaching career in 2001 and has been with the Lewisville ISD since 2004. He holds a Bachelors degree in Music Education from the University of Colorado and Masters from Southern Oregon University.

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The Flower Mound Band Program is comprised of nearly 400 students with 5 concert bands, 2 marching bands, 2 winter guards, numerous percussion ensembles, and jazz bands. Under Mr. Biskup's direction the band has been awarded numerous state, national, and international awards. The Flower Mound Marching Band was a 2014 Grand National Finalist, a 2015 BOA Regional and Super Regional Champion, and the 2016 Texas State Marching Contest Champion. The Wind Symphony placed 4th and 2nd in the two most recent Texas Music Educators Honor Band competitions, and performed at the 69th annual Midwest International Band and Orchestra Clinic in 2015. Mr. Biskup was also named the 2016 Flower Mound High School Teacher of the Year. Brent and his wife Amelie live in Flower Mound with their three sons Beau (6), Myles (3), and Quinn (1).

Jana Harvey was named Associate Director of Bands at Flower Mound High School in June of 2012. Prior to her appointment at Flower Mound, Ms. Harvey served as the Associate Director of Bands at Plano East Senior High and Director of Bands at Clark High School, both located in Plano, TX. Bands under her direction have consistently been awarded the "Sweepstakes Award" for Superior Ratings in the UIL Marching, Concert and Sight Reading

Competitions and have been named "Best in Class" at nationally adjudicated festivals throughout the U.S. The Flower Mound Wind Symphony was named a finalist in the Class 5A Honor Band competition by the TMEA in 2014 and was named "Runner-Up" in the 2016 6A Honor Band competition. The Flower Mound Wind Symphony was a featured performing group at the 69th annual Midwest Clinic. The Flower Mound HS Marching Band has been named a finalist and champion in the BOA Texas regional and super regional competitions. In the fall of 2014, Flower Mound attended the BOA Grand National Championships in Indianapolis, IN where they placed 6th in the nation among a very competitive field of marching bands. Most recently, the Flower Mound Marching Band was named the 2016 6A Texas State Champion. In 2004, Ms. Harvey was named Clark High School's "Teacher of the Year" and honored by the PTA with the life membership award. In 2005, Ms. Harvey was selected for induction into the American School Band Directors Association, which honors outstanding band directors in the U.S. Her professional affiliations include the TMEA, TBA, Tau Beta Sigma and Phi Beta Mu International Band Fraternity. Ms. Harvey maintains an active schedule as a clinician and adjudicator. She holds the Bachelor of Music Education degree from Texas Tech University.