

# Creating a Culture of Excellence in Your Second and Third Bands

**Brittney Cook and Bryn Roberts**

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*Our second and third bands should prepare our students to move up to the top band, but should also offer a wonderful band experience in and of themselves. Students should never have to wait until they are in the top band to experience excellence!*

## **Similarities Between Non-varsity and Varsity Bands**

Sometimes students in the non-varsity band can be sensitive to the perception that they are being looked down on or treated as unimportant. You can combat this impression by finding as many ways as possible to treat the non-varsity band the same as the varsity. This will also ensure that non-varsity students are adequately prepared for a smooth transition into the varsity band setting in the future.

- The same fundamental exercises can be used with all bands—whether this means all working out of the same book or using the same warm-up packet. Obviously these exercises can be modified (range, tempo, number of keys) to fit each ensemble's ability level, but it is important for students to know that all bands are working on the same skills.
- Similar vocabulary and language create a seamless transition between all the bands within the program. To accomplish this, the staff must confer and make deliberate decisions about how to teach specific concepts. What are the keywords used to explain ensemble balance and staccato vs. accented vs. marcato quarter notes? Each staff member can and will have their own way of reinforcing certain

concepts; however, a unified core of vocabulary will help solidify the student's understanding across all performing ensembles. If you asked a student in every band, "What is the purpose of us playing F Remington every day?" Will they give similar answers? Is the same concept being taught in every class? The higher bands will have more intricate listening assignments; however, the basic concepts should be the same across all bands.

- The same high expectations should be in place for all bands. Non-varsity bands can sound beautiful, be just as prepared for performances as the varsity band, and be successful at UIL. The level of literature performed by the non-varsity band will be lower, but the quality of the performance does not have to be. In order to reach this high level of achievement, the expectation for the non-varsity students must be the same as for the varsity students.

- If the varsity band does sectionals, outside-of-school rehearsals, and clinics, the non-varsity band should do the same. Don't be afraid to require a time commitment from these students! Students should know that all bands are equally important and all are working equally hard. If we treat

the non-varsity band as a part time commitment or a "blow-off" class, these students will be less invested in band, have a less positive experience in the program, and never reach their full potential as musicians.

- If the varsity band does objective sheets or pass-offs, do the same with the non-varsity band but tailor the material to fit their needs and ability level.

- Region band preparation is one of the most important things that we do all year to develop our students as individual musicians. This process can be tailored so that all students can participate at a level that is beneficial for them. Maybe some students learn only the region scales and not the etudes. Others learn shorter cuts from the region etudes. Others learn a different set of easier etudes and some students in the non-varsity band will be ready for full participation in the region audition process. However, by modifying this process to fit the various levels of our students, we give all students the opportunity to grow as musicians throughout the fall through their participation in learning the material.

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### Differences Between Non-varsity and Varsity Bands

A notable difference between varsity and non-varsity bands is the need for more fundamentals, theory, rhythm, and sight-reading with the younger bands. In addition, as the director of a non-varsity band you must know your audience and know with what details they need additional help.

- Make essential rhythmic practice more interesting by being creative and making it a game! When counting a rhythm chart, have the students count the rests instead of the notes. Have the woodwinds count notes and the brass count rests. Split into groups and count even/odd measures. Play/count the entire page with different responsibilities for each section. Add scales to the rhythm chart: each note or each measure is the next note up/down in the scale. Students love the team or contest idea—use different groups each day: brass/woodwind, girls/boys, shoelace color, glasses/no glasses, etc.
- Make sight-reading more fun with variety and by using recognizable songs. Instead of using the same method of sight-reading on a daily basis, change it up: sight-reading books, exercises written in Finale, new pieces, etc. By using different methods, sight-reading becomes more exciting and less monotonous. A great way to keep sight-reading fun is to put familiar songs into music notation software—BUT, put subtle rhythm or note changes into the song. This will ensure that they are actually **READING** the music and not simply playing what they know. This method is a win-win.

The director wins because the students sight-read and are excited about it. The students win because they go home and excitedly tell their parents that they played “Baby Shark” in band.

- Non-varsity band students may take longer to master concepts and to pass off objectives. Objective sheets can be the same for all bands but have different expectations for passing off, such as lower tempos or a longer period of time in which to pass off the objective. However, a beautiful tone, good hand position, correct notes, correct rhythms, accurate articulation, precise intonation, etc. are imperative for students in all bands.

- Non-varsity bands require a significant amount of time to be spent on the small details of being in band.

- Young bands need time spent on instrument maintenance. Take five minutes in a sectional once a month to ensure that brass slides and valves have been maintained. Check woodwind mouthpieces and reeds.

- Spend time discussing trip and concert itineraries. Can the students answer very specific questions? Where are we putting our cases? How are we lining them up? How are you carrying your instrument and binder? What is the first thing we will play on the stage? Arming the students with knowledge will decrease questions and anxiety on the performance day.

- Spend time with uniform guidelines and expectations. What does an all-black dress shoe look like? What does it feel like performing in a bow tie? Wear bow ties during a sectional so that the students can experience wearing one prior to the concert!

**It is important for students to know that all bands are working on the same skills.**

**Similar vocabulary and language create a seamless transition between all the bands within the program.**

**The same high expectations should be in place for all bands.**

**It is imperative that you know your non-varsity audience. Where does band rank on your student's list of priorities?**

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■ Communication is key for young bands—emails, flyers, newsletters, Remind, Twitter, Instagram, Facebook. It is amazing that with all the ways we communicate, some people will still stay “Well, I didn’t know.” The best way to ensure that the students are digesting the information you are distributing is to ask questions. What time does the bus leave? Does your ride know that you need to be somewhere on Saturday?

● It is imperative that you know your non-varsity audience. Where does band rank on your student’s list of priorities? It is perfectly acceptable for sports to be the student’s number one priority. It is perfectly acceptable for band to rank 3, 4, or 5 on their list of priorities. As long as they are showing up, meeting the requirements of the class, and participating, all is well!! Band programs NEED solid, non-varsity band kids. These students show up, have good attitudes, love band, and are rock-solid on their third clarinet/trumpet/trombone parts. You need to know your audience - if the majority of your ensemble has band ranking as 4 or 5 on their list, set high standards but know that you may not be able to push them to play the world’s most challenging UIL program. By knowing your audience, you will also be able to identify your “workers” - the ambitious students who have dreams of moving up to a higher ensemble. You can feed these workers with growth opportunities: invitations to an upper band’s sectional, participation in the Region band process, invitation to perform with the upper band, etc.

### Repertoire for the Non-varsity Band

Young band music often gets criticized for “sounding the same” or not having many “good choices.” There are GREAT young band choices available; however, you may have to search a little harder to find them.

● As a starting point for picking new music, what skills are you hoping the students gain from playing it? Are they learning new rhythms, new time signatures, new key

signatures, section exposure, independent playing, etc.? Will the piece in question provide interest for the students and the audience? If the piece you are selecting does not provide anything new or challenging for the students, what is the reason you are picking it?

● When selecting UIL music for non-varsity bands, remember that for UIL good is good. You are not being judged on how difficult or challenging the piece is. The easiest grade one and the hardest grade five can be performed EQUALLY WELL! Even a grade one can be played in tune, in balance, in time, with clear articulation, with transparency, and with high musicality. A grade one played with ALL of those things leads to an impressive and beautiful performance! There is not an Honor Band competition for non-varsity bands. What are you trying to accomplish by playing a grade level higher? Non-varsity band students are NOT going to gain the skills needed to move into the varsity band because they played a hard UIL program. They are going to gain those skills through individual fundamentals, scales/thirds/arpeggios, solo contests, and ensemble contests. By picking an achievable UIL program, you can spend sectional time working on fine tuning the achievable UIL pieces (phrasing, tuning, dynamics, style, matching articulation, etc.) in addition to working on all the other things needed to further their individual musicianship.

● Utilize your winter and spring concerts to explore more challenging music. Use your winter concert to introduce a concept that the students will see in their UIL music. By scaffolding this information, the learning process for the UIL music will move faster. For the spring concert, try incorporating a harder piece that includes a “varsity band concept.” This could be a piece with an advanced time or key signature, advanced rhythm, or advanced range. Through the sectional time you gained by choosing an achievable UIL program and working on other skills, the students will be prepared to handle the higher degree of difficulty.

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- Score study is ESSENTIAL when picking young band pieces. Because of the limited range of young band students, you will often get some “wonky” orchestrations in young band music. When looking at a potential piece, look at the major cadence points.
  - What is the orchestration for those major cadence points?
  - How many students do you have on each part - how many root/third/fifth will your ensemble have on that cadence point?
  - Is the third of a major chord on a note with a super sharp tendency for that instrument?
- Is the fifth of a major chord on a note with a flat tendency for that instrument?
- Is it possible to easily rewrite it? When rewriting cadence points, ensure that you do not change the chord structure. You are simply swapping notes around to put the instruments on a note that can easily achieve the tuning needed for that chord.

***It truly is the second and third bands that determine the strength and depth of a band program. By creating a culture of excellence in these bands, we can give these non-varsity students a tremendous band experience and prepare them to move up and contribute to the top band in the future.***

*Brittney Cook is the Associate Band Director at Briarhill Middle School. She teaches the Concert Band, assists with the Symphonic Band and teaches beginner woodwind classes. From 2010-16, Ms. Cook was the Assistant Band Director at Byrd Middle School in Duncanville, Texas. While at Byrd Middle School, she taught the Symphonic II band, assisted with the Symphonic I and Symphonic III band, and taught a 7th grade beginner woodwind class. In addition to her responsibilities at Byrd, she taught 6th grade beginner woodwind classes at Daniel Intermediate and assisted with the Duncanville High School Marching Band. In 2015, the Byrd Symphonic I band placed 4th in the TMEA CCC Honor Band Competition. The Byrd Symphonic I band was also named a National Winner in the Mark of Excellence National Wind Band Competition in 2012, 2014 and 2015.*

*Ms. Cook earned her Bachelor of Music Education from Northwestern State University of Louisiana. As a student at NSU, Ms. Cook was a four year member of the NSU Wind Symphony and the Natchitoches-Northwestern Symphony Orchestra, and the principal piccolo player of these groups for three years. She also performed with many chamber ensembles and served as the Head Drum Major of the Spirit of Northwestern Marching Band. Ms. Cook was also a three-time member of the CBDNA Louisiana All-State Intercollegiate Band.*

*A native of the Dallas-Fort Worth area, Ms. Cook graduated from Lamar High School where she was a member of the Lamar Symphony Orchestra, named the 2004-2005 TMEA Honor Full Orchestra. Ms. Cook remains an active musician in the DFW area. She currently plays flute for the Mesquite Symphony Orchestra. She also plays in many local community bands and in pit orchestras. Ms. Cook has also presented clinics on Flute Pedagogy at the TMEA and TBA Convention/Clinics. Ms. Cook holds professional memberships in the Texas Music Educators Association, the Texas Bandmasters Association, the National Flute Society and the Texas Flute Society.*

*Bryn Roberts is the Assistant Band Director at Reedy High School in Frisco ISD, where she conducts the Wind Symphony and Symphonic Band. Ms. Roberts has been at Reedy since the school opened in 2015. Before coming to Reedy, Ms. Roberts spent seven years as an Assistant Band Director and Color Guard Director at Westlake High School in Austin. During her time at Westlake, the marching band advanced to the UIL State Marching Contest four times, making finals three of those times. They also made the finals at the BOA San Antonio Super Regional four times. In 2012, they won the Sudler Shield, recognizing outstanding marching bands. The Westlake Wind Ensemble was selected to play at the Midwest Band and Orchestra Clinic in Chicago in 2013. In addition, all four Westlake concert bands received Sweepstakes awards at UIL Concert and Sightreading Contest for six consecutive years, and all four bands performed at Carnegie Hall in 2009 and 2013. All thirteen years of Ms. Roberts' career have been spent directing 2nd, 3rd, and 4th bands.*

*Ms. Roberts graduated Summa Cum Laude from Texas Tech University in 2005 with a Bachelor of Music and received a Master of Music Education from Texas Tech in 2014. She has presented clinics at The Midwest Clinic, the Texas Music Educators Association convention, and the Texas Bandmasters Association convention. She has had articles published in the Southwestern Musician and online with Texas Music Education Research, the SmartMusic blog, and Band Directors Talk Shop.*