

Recruiting and Retention

Gary Gribble

Instrumental music begins in our school system in sixth grade. It seems that more kids are getting “hooked” on multiple activities at earlier ages than ever before. We have summer sports and arts camps for kids as young as four years of age. The potential downside for our music program is that the kids become totally dedicated to other activities before they get a chance to join a music program.

Obviously, maintaining a music program that is of the highest quality and offers numerous opportunities for involvement is one key to attracting and keeping students. Kids will not develop a long-term relationship with your program if they see few benefits. If they perceive your activity to be too time-intensive or too expensive, then you will have a harder time recruiting.

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Consider the following: Visibility

Perform in as many school and community events as possible. Students are constantly exposed to sports and popular music/dance, but seldom see live performances by “our type” of ensembles. Perform in parades, send chamber groups to community events, and work to create joint concerts with feeder schools whenever possible. Provide a performing group for school system events, community recognition

ceremonies, or school assemblies. We recently started performing at a local nursing home as a community service event.

Feeder program connections

Plan several joint events per year, some bringing the middle school kids to the high school (they need to see the facilities), and some taking the high schoolers to the middle schools or elementary schools. It can be joint concerts, chamber ensemble events, or social activities. Take high school students into middle school classes for an “open forum” conversation about the activities and benefits available at the next level.

We invite upcoming middle school students to join us at a football game each Fall. They march in with the high school band, perform the National Anthem for the crowd, then join the marching band in the bleachers to play the stands tunes. We invite our feeder ensembles to join us on our annual “Pops” Concert in the Spring.

Communicate, communicate, communicate:

Send a newsletter to each middle school student several times per year. Include lots of candid photos of students having fun in band. Mention the opportunities for performance, travel, and social interaction. Send

regular news items related to the high school band via e-mail to all families with students in middle school band.

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Maintain a bulletin board at feeder schools with photos and flyers announcing upcoming events. Schedule an information meeting for all 8th grade parents prior to the registration deadline for high school courses. Meet with incoming families in the late Spring to discuss marching band operations.

Create activities:

A carnival for beginning instrumental students can be a great way to get them excited about band. Have a qualified teacher for each instrument. Set up a series of short classes to demonstrate instrument assembly, posture and hand position, producing the first sound, reading basic notation, and instrument care. Keep these brief. In between sessions, have games and activities. Rent those giant inflatables if you can afford them... have ice cream or cotton candy.... do face painting...and include plenty of the high school students to assist. They can demonstrate instruments, coach the games, and guide the younger students through the day.

Invite middle school students to sit in with select high school ensembles throughout the year. If there are similar

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performing groups in your school and your feeder school(s), consider combining them for a number on a concert.

Dress for success:

Band kids need to have spirit wear just like the kids in all the other school activities. Create a special t-shirt for your activities, have spirit wear for sale through the band booster club or school spirit store. Get the band advertised early and often. Don't forget to give your administrators a band shirt to wear to those "special occasions".

Balance work and play:

Make sure that there are regularly scheduled social activities for all students. Try video game night, trivia contests, pizza/ice cream parties, swim parties, or movie nights. The students need to develop a sense of family as well as developing their musical skills. If band is a fun place to be, word will spread quickly.

Keep up with current popular technology:

Use Facebook, Twitter, blog sites, etc. as communication opportunities. Obviously, you must maintain a professional and ethical boundary between teacher and students, but there are ways to send out band-related information using the resources that the kids understand and embrace. We have created a DVD that shows glimpses into the high school program and we distribute it to all of our middle school students before they get their high school registration materials.

Meet your future:

Make sure that the directors from all levels attend performances and visit the classrooms whenever possible. Putting a face and/or personality with the director's name can ease the transition as students progress into the advanced levels.

Be proactive:

Once you get students in your program, retention is the next phase. Communicate with your administrators and guidance counselors regularly regarding scheduling. Talk with your students constantly about their participation for the long term. This is especially important during the early years of participation. Do not be afraid to survey your students about program issues related to their participation. You might discover some valuable insights.

Be willing to change:

Sometimes, we become creatures of habit. Different generations have different priorities and expectations. We must be willing to examine our policies and procedures in order to stay current. Look at your calendar and at your budget. Could you make participation more attractive by adjusting your plans? Does the commitment of time outside of school seem in proportion with other activities? Are there sufficient performance opportunities to balance the amount of rehearsal expected? Sometimes these are difficult questions and it is frightening to think about changes in our established patterns, however, if we remain static, we run the risk of becoming dated and of falling behind the times.

Recruiting and retention are vital to the livelihood of our music programs. We cannot assume that students will beat a path to our door. We must be salespersons for our activities and we must make sure that we are fulfilling not only the musical but also the social needs of our students. As other opportunities become more attractive, we must keep pace or step aside. With careful planning and some creative use of resources, we can do a lot to make our programs attractive to future members.

Gary D. Gribble has recently retired, having been Director of Bands at Alan C. Pope High School in Georgia's Cobb County School District since the school opened in 1987. Under his direction, the Pope High School Band has earned more than 400 awards of excellence and has been a Bands of America regional champion, a regional finalist 19 times, and a Grand National semifinalist twice. The Pope band received the Sudler Shield from the John Philip Sousa Foundation in 1992. The school's marching band has participated in parades across the continental U.S., in Hawaii, and in London, England, and its symphonic bands have performed in state, regional, and national concerts. Mr. Gribble earned his bachelor's degree in music education from Georgia State University. He has served as an adjudicator, guest conductor, and clinician in Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Kentucky, Illinois, Tennessee, and Florida. In 1996, Mr. Gribble choreographed a portion of the opening ceremonies for the Paralympic Games in Atlanta. In 2008, he was named a Claes Nobel Educator of Distinction by the National Society of High School Scholars. Mr. Gribble was also selected for inclusion in the American School Band Directors Association and is currently on the executive board of the National Band Association.