

Recruiting, Retaining, and Motivating Your Title 1 Students

Eric Jimenez

As an eager band director, I actively sought guidance and mentorship with regard to improving my music program. Time and time again I was met with pessimistic narratives such as, “Just finish the year and get out.” “You will never make a 1.” and “Those kids will never get it.” I was disheartened to hear this because I still identified with those very same kids. Unfortunately, not much has changed for colleagues seeking the same guidance. As I transition from the band hall into higher education, I am making the commitment to provide solutions to problems we might experience serving Title 1 settings.

DISCLAIMER: I chose the term “Title 1” in order to include as many of my colleagues as possible. To better fit your respective programs, the “Title 1” term is interchangeable with urban, rural, or under-resourced. The information I am going to share is a culmination of my experience as a product, practitioner, and researcher of serving students in Title 1 settings.

Establishing an Understanding of OUR Students

Note my intentional use of the word “our” in this section heading. That frame of mind is the first step in understanding. The day you receive a roster, those individual names have become your students. When we seek guidance, we lead not with positive anecdotes but rather with the issues we experience. Such as, “My students don’t practice.” or “They have to go home to take care of siblings.” and “They laugh when I redirect them.”

These typical examples could be the result of poverty affecting our students’ academic and behavior performance.

When frustration takes over due to the inability to control our students’ environment, we must remind ourselves of that which we can control—the environment we offer. We have the ability to provide a space that is inviting, safe and celebratory of all students. For this to translate into your program, I suggest you learn to empathize with your students rather than have sympathy for them.

Ten years ago, I attended my first TBA Convention/Clinic. I was fortunate enough to sit in a clinic that altered my approach to teaching from that day forward. A Title 1 band director shared personal experiences of when he attended the middle school he was now serving. The same struggles he experienced years ago continued to be evident in his students today. Some of his students walked in wearing the same clothes as the day before, lacking supplies, sleep deprived, and hungry. Initially he was drawn to finding ways to make monetary deposits, but he knew that was not a rational nor sustainable

solution. Instead, he found ways to make emotional deposits to each of his students. He greeted students personally at the door and created a structured but inviting atmosphere. Once he made enough deposits, he had the ability to redirect students without the fear of “overdrafting”. (An overdraft is viewed as a negative reaction or disciplinary behavior.)

30-50% of our behaviors stem from our DNA, while 50-70% stem from our environment.

—Saudino, 2005

When we allow ourselves to see our students as vessels that have the capacity for us to pour positive learning experiences into them, we can use music as our vehicle to drive this mission.

Recruitment—Make Band Fun!

In my first year of teaching I was tasked with revitalizing a middle school band program that hadn’t had a band for several years. I reached out to directors for guidance as to what I should do first. My colleague replied, “Get them a band t-shirt. Kids love t-shirts!” He was right. Every program I served has received a custom shirt design. Additionally, the shirts were approved by the administration and became a part of the approved student dress code. (See designs below.)



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High School Beginner Band

High school directors should be open to create a beginner band. Yes, it did eliminate conference time from my schedule, but the result was increased student participation and retention. Students were greeted as part of the family from the day they decided to join and were allowed to participate in all activities. By this means, we recruited students who desired to be in band but were unable because of lack of access or availability in their schedule.

Social Media

Create a unique handle for your band. Allow stakeholders to tag your band to share positive content via social media. This platform will allow you to reach students who may not listen to announcements or see flyers posted in the school. Social media is an extension of your classroom and a useful resource to allow community members, parents, and other colleagues to see the great work your programs are doing.

Understanding our Student's Community and Socio-Economic Status

Be Vulnerable

One of my first recommendations to any new teacher is to get familiar with the community you are serving. Drive around and find local places to eat. Although I was a product of the neighborhoods several of my students resided in, I was still surprised to hear some of the adversities my students were facing. After inquiring why some of my students were not practicing at home, they shared they didn't feel safe walking home with their instrument. Instead of punishing them for their lack of practice, I created time in my schedule to arrive a bit earlier, offer lunch practice sessions, and stay a bit later after school. This "deposit" allowed me to reach even more students.

Empathize with their Economic Situation

When we serve low-income students, we may create narratives about our students' financial situations that don't

really exist. Instead, let us create solutions for our students and families such as:

- Create flexible rehearsal schedules
- Implement payment plans
- Find sponsors to defray costs
- Designate fundraisers to assist with student fees

Listen to each student's situation and be open to adjusting your expectations on a case by case basis. Do not blame students for something they cannot control.

Develop a Cultural Understanding

I remember helping one of my colleagues understand the importance of a quinceañera within Latino families. I offered my insight into the cultural event he planned to attend. His attendance resulted in a huge emotional deposit and received several invitations to other quinceañeras thereafter. Allow yourself the opportunity to be present for your students' special events. If attending off-campus events is not an option, be open to supporting non-music academic events.

Survey your students about their individual and family musical preferences. The data collected will allow you to make informed decisions about the music and performances you will program throughout the year. A useful site that allows you to find repertoire that connects your students' home music with their school music is www.composerdiversity.com. If your program has the capacity to implement culturally relevant ensembles, do so. These familiar musical experiences could lead students to be more receptive to traditional ensembles: Mariachi, Brass Bands, Latin Percussion Ensembles, Jazz Bands, Banda Sinaloense, and Conjunto/Tejano.

I am present to the fact that each of our programs are unique and should be viewed on an individual basis. I challenge each of you to try one of the strategies above. Be vulnerable and keep the forging of relationships as a driving force in your teaching. Best of luck to you as we continue to make deposits through the vehicle of music!

Eric Jimenez has revitalized several band programs throughout Houston ISD. His programs at Sharpstown MS, Hamilton MS, Waltrip HS, Davis HS, and Heights HS increased both student participation and instrument inventory as well as earned Division I and "Best in Class" ratings at UIL and numerous other festivals. The Heights HS Band advanced to UIL Area Marching Contest for the first time in school history. Jimenez is the recipient of Hamilton MS's Teacher of the Year award, LULAC Educator of the Year, and a Grammy Educational Award for his work at Davis HS. He is a 2009 graduate of Prairie View A&M University and earned his Master of Education in Educational Leadership from Lamar University in 2014. Jimenez is currently a Doctoral Music Education student at the University of Houston Moores School of Music.