

Having a Long Term Vision of How to Structure Your Program (Part 1)

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Part 2 will appear in the next issue of Bandmasters Review.

Over the years, I've had the pleasure of observing, judging, and mentoring many enthusiastic younger teachers who are always inquiring how to take their consistently "superior" middle school program into the stratosphere of "exemplary" programs. Their desire for growth is genuine and their ultimate goal is to cultivate a program that can provide their students with life-altering performances such as at The Midwest Clinic or TMEA convention. Most band directors have lofty goals, but many of us often only operate year to year. While the curricular approach you take with fundamentals and literature choices are a big part of achieving those goals, the true success of your program lies first in how it is structured: staffing, scheduling, beginner classes, instrumentation, etc. Rarely are we given the ideal set-up of all of these things. We have to fight for them by constantly and consistently educating students, parents, teachers, and administrators with a long-term plan in mind. Developing positive relationships with these stakeholders is the key to success.

Play the "Long Game" Band Every Day

Though we would think this is a given, having Band class every day from 5th, 6th, or 7th grade onward is essential to the growth of your program. Learning to play an instrument is a "muscle memory" activity and requires daily repetition to improve. Band class every day is especially critical in lower

income socioeconomic situations where parental support and the student's home life is less than ideal for reinforcement and retention. To make this a reality, learn more about your master schedule and work with your principal/counselors. Ask to be in the meetings and give them 2-3 solutions you can live with (for now). First priority for band every day should be your top performing band and your beginner classes. If you don't currently have band every day, some possible alternatives are: add an "optional" 2nd band class, add before and/or afterschool rehearsals on off days, use practice records/learning logs to monitor daily practice, require audio/video submissions of full fundamental exercises/warm-up until it's a habit, use quick on the spot chair tests to start each day to make sure they are practicing between days. Then keep politely pestering your administration until you get band every day...don't give up!

Like-Instrument Beginners

Many programs in Texas take this for granted, but creating a schedule that has like-instrument beginner classes is crucial to starting your students off with as few fundamental deficits as possible. The drastic variety of embouchures, bore sizes, hand positions, air usage, fingerings, etc. among the instruments require different approaches and pacing. If you don't currently have like-instrument

beginner classes, I would prioritize at least a three-way WW / Brass / Percussion split first. Then work each year with your administration to split out 1-2 more classes until you have an ideal set-up with nine separate classes: Flute, Clarinet, Double Reed, Sax, Trumpet, Horn, Trombone, Low Brass, Percussion. Prioritize Double Reeds for splitting first! You cannot expect to play Grade IV's with your top band in three years without quality double reeds. Know that flute is VERY fundamentally different from the rest of WWs and should be the next class separated. Horn should also be separated before the other brass. If you can't separate percussion, prioritize mallet playing and supplement snare in sectionals.

Utilize your *entire cluster staff* to make this happen if necessary (but be willing to help them too!) If you're a high school director and you've read this far, congratulations! Taking time each day to send your assistant directors to make this happen will reap benefits in your marching band years down the road. If you can't get an ideal beginner schedule, supplement with before or after school sectionals, in-class master classes, lessons, summer band week to jump-start, etc. Again, I urge you to utilize HS staff to split these classes so they can start on their native instruments.

Ability-based Performing Bands

A big part of pushing students after their beginner year is creating an

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environment where your best players push the others to play at their level. To me, ability-based bands with mixed grade levels after the beginner year help make this a reality even sooner. We all know that by the end of the beginner year, your classes have self-separated into the practicers and non-practicers. Grouping those students that practice more often and the right way will push them to make each other better. Plus you can set requirements/expectations for membership from the start based on their placement. We utilize a contract so they know what they are getting into from the start. Then each year, you can add an additional requirement such as sectionals, extra performances, summer band attendance to the top group...and then add it to your 2nd band in 1-3 years later.

Placement in Bands should be determined by a comprehensive audition in April/May. We do an All-Region-style audition with scales, two short etudes, and sight-reading. Expectations for 7th and 8th graders are similar except for ranges (especially Brass). Therefore 7th graders are scored on a curve so they can compete with 8th graders. We're looking for students that can catch up to our best 8th graders eventually and push them. Their contract is due before the audition so the parents and students know what we expect of them. We utilize the same performance rubric throughout the year and encourage/coach them, so how students place is not a surprise to them or their parents.

If you can't get mixed grades in performing bands at first, get creative to make this happen as much as possible: before or after school sectionals with both grades, set-up classes by section and meet full band before school, use "zero hour", summer band week to jump-start, etc. Then again, prioritize and lobby your administration to make this part of your daily schedule this for your top band first, then add it to your 2nd band a couple years later once it's well established.

Staffing to Split Performing Bands

To tackle Grade IV literature by the spring, 7th and 8th graders (assuming 6th graders are beginners) need to continue to develop their individual skills. Tonal maturity, range extension (2+ octaves for Brass, 3+ octaves for WWs),

faster articulation (including multiple tonguing), dynamic extremes (let your brass PLAY OUT), and a wider variety of keys/styles/rhythms/time signatures all need to be pushed. Splitting your classes as often as possible into WW/Brass/Perc is critical to continue this development. Again, if you don't have an assistant, utilize your entire cluster's staff to make this happen (even partially—M/W/F for example—and be willing to help them as well).

Prioritize splitting in your top performance band first and then work toward the 2nd band. Split for your fundamentals/warm-up early in the year. Then once you're satisfied with the direction their tone/fundamentals are headed, combine for fundamentals and split to teach harder music separately as you approach each concert. A once-a-week sectional isn't enough. Obviously facilities factor into this, so educate your administration to secure a second room at the same time. Be willing to change your master schedule to make this possible. Utilize a cafeteria stage, a choir room during their conference, portables, etc.

Engaging Stakeholders

Prioritize implementation of these goals based off your current situation. Getting what you want is a matter of convincing stakeholders it is absolutely necessary for the success of your program. Just like with your students, you must first build positive relationships with the adults in the room to get what you need. You must get to know them first and what drives them. If the only conversation you have with principals and counselors is "Hey, remember I needed this," the less likely they will be to want to help you. Be a team player and be willing to say "YES" to things that won't affect your long-term goals...pick your battles wisely. Also, don't wait and ask for things at the end of the year. If you want the master schedule changed or an extra classroom (for instance), meet with your principal and/or fine arts director in the fall semester to plant the seed and ask to be included in such decisions. Tell them up front you are not asking for a "yes", just for them to consider it. Present data to support your request: chair tests, pass-offs, District/Region results, Solo & Ensemble medals, UIL, etc. Administrators understand data as a justification for making changes. Find

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times to casually remind them throughout the year and meet with them in January to see if it's possible for the next school year. Remind them again in the late spring. This could be something as simple as what time your band has lunch or what day your after-school duty is so it doesn't interrupt your sectionals schedule. If you can't get it next year, put a pin in it and come back to them next fall. Chip away until they can't say "NO".

Once you've got things moving toward your vision, you must show some incremental improvement as proof that what you asked for has actually equated to progress. You have to grow the program both in numbers and tangible successes to advocate openly for more of what you need.

Remember, have a long-term vision and the patience to execute it.

Nathaniel Neugent is Director of Bands at T.A. Howard Middle School in Mansfield ISD. His duties include conducting the Honor Band and assisting with the Symphonic and Concert Band. The Howard Honor Band has been a five-time CCC State Honor Band finalist placing in the top seven each time and finishing as First Runner-Up in 2017-2018. The band was awarded the Mark of Excellence National Wind Bands Honors eight years. Mr. Neugent has continued the long tradition of UIL Sweepstakes Awards with the Howard Honor and Symphonic Bands earning First Division ratings eleven years in a row. The Howard Honor Band was also invited to perform at the 2017 Midwest Clinic. Mr. Neugent previously served as Director of Bands at Creekview High School in Carrollton, TX. While there, his bands consistently earned superior UIL ratings and the Mustang Marching Band twice advanced to the 5A State Marching Contest. They were also Bands of America Regional and Super-Regional Finalists. Mr. Neugent began his career in Lewisville ISD at Lakeview Middle School in The Colony, under the mentorship of Clay Paul and Dick Clardy. He is a native Texan, having begun his musical training under Joe Gunn at Harwood Junior High and his father, Tom Neugent at Trinity High School in the HEB school district. He received his bachelor's degree in music education, graduating cum laude, from the University of North Texas. Nathaniel was recently honored to be inducted into Phi Bet Mu International and is a member of TMEA and TBA.