

Reflections on Band in a Pandemic

Stephen Cox

Greetings from your friendly neighborhood small town band director / Google Classroom professional / temperature checker / video production engineer / mask distributor and whatever else we're expected to do in the 2020 band world. This has been one for the books, hasn't it?

Between telling teenagers 5,000 times a day to pull their mask over their nose and making daily life or death decisions, I have a few observations.

Engagement vs. Education

I'm going to make a big statement on band during a pandemic, both online and in person. I think that in this time, we need to put engagement in front of education.

There will be a time after this pandemic when we can do a million playing tests and work our kids to the bone to bring out that true Texas band excellence. Right now though, it's more important to provide them an outlet for creativity, self-expression, and community. Most importantly, I think we need to provide them a margin.

I felt personally convicted when I heard Richard Floyd at a clinic a few years ago talk about selecting music with a margin when you choose a concert program. He talked about planning a program you know for sure will be successful, even if you lose a week or two of rehearsal to snow, illness, etc.

I have often chosen music that takes every second of our rehearsal

time—and then some—to prepare and I understand how stressful pushing students to the brink can be. I also understand how rewarding it is when it works out. The problem right now is that everyone is already pushed to the brink.

There is a fog surrounding all of us. It is the stench of loss. Loss of time with our students, loss of connection, and for some of us loss of loved ones. We are all grieving in some way this year, whether that is for events that have been canceled or loved ones from whom we have been separated. Everyone has experienced trauma.

One of the big advantages of band at large, and marching band in particular, is that we get to push students out of their comfort zone and past what they believe are their limits. This is a powerful part of adolescence and it can empower them to push beyond their imaginary boundaries.

Right now though, their baseline has been raised to a point I never experienced in school. Imagine going through this year of protest, disease, and politics when you were 15. How would you react to trying to catch up with months of lost learning, social

time, and online learning? How would it feel to miss out on prom or lose your first job due to an invisible disease? What would it have felt like to have adults you trust disagree on the basic facts of the situation?



Eastland HS band director Stephen Cox and Eastland High School art teacher Stephanie Cox

I'm not at all suggesting that we don't give our students the best we have, far from it. I'm just suggesting that now is the time for ultimate flexibility. Now is the time for understanding, kindness, and community.

The competitive nature of Texas band programs can go too far in a normal year if we are not careful. In a year in which many schools in the United States are not even holding in-person classes, we have to realign our priorities.

I fully believe that it is more important that our students love music and love band than it is that we make our usual progress. We have to actually lower our standards and expectations at times to account for

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students arriving and disappearing in our classes. We have to create assignments and experiences that students can adapt for their current level of “overwhelmed-ness.” Above all, we have to focus on compassion.

We still set goals and learning objectives, but when achievement is not where it normally is, we have to grant ourselves and our students a “Covid Curve.”

Yes, this is not what I wanted, but considering the circumstance I will be happy with forward progress regardless of the pace.

The very fact that many of us have had in-person classes here in Texas is a huge blessing. Any school with in-person classes is ahead of the game right now in terms of musical and technical progress.

By focusing on engagement, we are ensuring the survival of our music programs, even if it means that we play slightly easier music for a year or two.



Macey Fortenberry, Hallie Hagan, and Daniela Coyote - Some Eastland Band senior flute players sporting masks at a football game

What Flexibility Looks Like

When a student tells you that this year, their parents don't want them traveling to away games, what do you do? That is unacceptable in a normal year. This year that may need to be acceptable, even respected.

If you are teaching online, can you give different difficulty levels as options? Some of your students will pick

a more difficult assignment if they find it more interesting, and an easy assignment can still cultivate learning and progress while breathing room.

Saying “yes” as often as possible and creating a dialogue with students about their expectations and goals should inform the current band classroom more than an attempt to do everything “the way we've always done it.”

Focusing on Your Community

I'm focused on finding ways to have the band do more in the community this fall (outdoors, masked, and socially distanced). We're about to decorate the town square with the organization that does our Christmas lighting.

We are still doing our annual door-to-door canned food drive. We leave bags with notes on every front door in town. People leave canned goods on their porch at a predetermined time, and a few days later we pick them up with no contact.

We also plan to Christmas carol in a few weeks. We'll take small groups, knock on doors, back up 20 feet, and play *Jingle Bells* when they answer. Distanced, outdoors, safe, and I'll bet that some people will find that musical connection extra meaningful in this time with so much social isolation.

I'm Not Okay and Admitting that Helped a Lot

This year has been traumatic for everyone. I have not been okay. I'm in a state of constant anxiety that I have not previously experienced. As I read the posts on Facebook of fellow directors being hospitalized, quarantined, or canceling contests, I grieve for them. I'm watching my students suffer and it hurts. It seems like a constant parade of disappointment.

At the same time, I have been healthy, employed, and get to see my students in person. This allowed me to convince myself that I was okay for a long time. Last week, I finally stopped to take into account how much every decision, cancellation, and disappointment has affected my spirit, and I'm willing to say out loud and publicly that I am not okay right now. It feels better to admit that. I told my students this, and I believe they can relate.

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Band director Stephen Cox checking temperatures while dressed as Han Solo for Halloween this year.

For those of you who are completely online: consider all involvement from your students a blessing. They don't sign up for band to see you on a screen and do Smart Music assignments. They do it for a million reasons and not the least of it is the collaborative music experience. Give them time, love, and a chance to be a community. The task you have of being online for any extended period is an incredible challenge. Celebrate all participation and give them community and flexibility.

It's not your fault that this is happening. Your students know that and appreciate the very hard work you are doing. I have spoken to several directors that are beating themselves up over student progress during online learning. Don't do that. This is not normal band, and all online band involvement is a miracle.

We will persevere and we will move forward. This will end in due time, and Texas bands will continue to

inspire and grow students. In true marching band fashion, I believe that all of this adversity will make us stronger. We need to acknowledge that this has taken us to our breaking point, and we need to make sure that, at the end of the day, we have put our effort into helping our students connect with each other, engage in music, and know that they matter. If we do that, we can truly say that we have done the best we can.

Stephen Cox is the director of bands at Eastland High School in Eastland, TX. A graduate of Howard Payne University, Mr. Cox has a passion for small rural school education. The Eastland Band under his direction has experienced consecutive UIL sweepstakes, OPS state titles, and performed at the Midwest clinic as a part of their small school initiative. This last year Mr. Cox was a top ten finalist for the Grammy Music Educator of the Year award. Stephen Cox is married to Eastland HS Art Teacher Stephanie Cox and they live in Eastland with their three children Aubree, Caesar, and Chuck, two birds Gus and Henri, and their dog Nellie.