

Now is the Time to Reinvent

Darcy Vogt Williams

I've watched the Facebook exits from our profession for years. Like clockwork, each spring brings a stream of friends, colleagues, and acquaintances leaving the band world for something else. While sad every time, we are less and less surprised with each loss; and they are just that: losses in the deepest sense. The ones this year though are interesting, not because of who they are, but because after a year in which most of us were forced to do "Band lite" in some capacity (different hours, fewer performances, a shift in competition) folks are deciding not to return just as the promise and excitement of REAL Band arrives.

Why do they leave?

Have we recruited to our profession incorrectly?

Have we not been forthright with what teaching versus performing actually is?

Have we allowed the pursuit of excellence to warp Band into a monster that eats away at our passion for music education?

No one majors in music ed because it was a casual hobby. We are losing band directors every year who came into our field excited and passionate about Band and leave excited about the prospects of anything else. They abandon their passion profession, their calling, for *any other job* that allows them more time with their children; more time with their spouse; more time to pursue their interest in marathon training, hip-hop dancing, home-brew craft beer, master

gardening, romance languages; more time to do *anything* outside of Band. They aren't bad people for wanting to be the well-rounded humans we tell our band parents their children can be. For many, the cost-benefit ratio of Band has devalued our profession. While there will always be factors largely out of our control like salary and administrative demands, we can control the demands we place on ourselves and our programs.

Before you take a deep breath and prepare for the return of unsustainability, perhaps it is time to reinvent.

The simplistic argument claims it is "this way" or we risk poor quality. I would counter that many programs employ strategies that are ineffective, inefficient, and unneeded. Additionally, our profession habitually sets goals that make the process grueling and geared more toward getting a name on the wall than creating a joyful, sustainable program for ourselves and our students. "If they can't hack it, make room for someone who can." Let's not make this discussion so binary. We aren't losing lazy, bad directors; we're losing charismatic, successful directors who realize they can't and *won't* do <this> for the next 20 years.

A successful model does not necessarily mean an efficient one.

Time and energy are two of the most common words used when explaining why a person is leaving our profession. I would venture to say most who exit

still love music and the idea of Band but are no longer interested in the time and energy required to do Band "successfully".

Most of the work I do outside of the school day is spent on sectionals and assessment—both necessary components to a successful program. Let me be the first to admit that I have required hour-long sectionals of sections that have already achieved my goals for them. I have required sectionals beyond what is necessary to drill and drill and drill again skills already successful by any standard. I have nervously asked if my other band director friends are still doing sectionals with their kids, gauging whether I am lazy for letting my students have the afternoon off.

I have killed instruction time to hear pass-offs from students I already know have mastered the passage. I have assigned recorded pass-offs that require me to spend additional time outside of my already extended work day to assess. I have required pass-offs on region music that is inappropriate and debasing for some of my students because that's what you do in the fall. I have assigned pass-offs to give a graded goal for the students to meet when the same goal could have been met with more repetition or any number of playing based-tactics that doesn't take time away from instruction or MY time.

I do not plan to stop doing sectionals or pass-offs, but I will strongly re-evaluate how I spend that time, if I really need ALL of that time, if all of

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it truly needs to take place outside of the school day, and when they are *necessary* versus *expected*.

A success in the band hall does not necessarily mean a success at home.

I never want to look back and realize I spent more time with my band family than my home family. Full stop.

We are too creative to stick with the same blueprint for success that drives people away from our profession year after year just because we are told that success looks like <this>.

We are too smart to believe that the expectations for our time and our programs are set by anyone other than ourselves.

Is the process successful?

The first time I entered Honor Band I was told that if I wanted to advance, I had to play harder music. My band may have sounded good, but I needed to play more notes. I took that lesson to heart.

I regularly program Grade 4s for my band not because the music is necessarily of a higher quality or because my students and I just love the literature on that list. I program Grade 4s because I need that stamp of a “4” and the four pages per song that comes with it to advance in Honor Band. I regularly program music with developmentally inappropriate ranges for my brass kids, technique that requires additional sectionals on top of the normal ones or demanding that I flat out asking kids not to play sections so that I can advance in Honor Band... I... because my students aren't at the listening to learn from and compare the other recordings, and because half of the performers are in high school by the time the competition actually rolls around.

I can remember too many performances in which my students and I were *thrilled* on stage in the moment only to be disappointed hours later when I dissected the recording, knowing that if we were going to advance, we'd need to re-record and probably the clarinets needed to come in every morning next week so we could really lock in that section. There's nothing like five morning sectionals in one week to make you love band.

I am a pro at programming in a way that requires every extra minute available and stress levels that surely mark me as a “Successful Band Director”, and I have done so because I'm programming for a *competitive* band. A competitive band and one that grows all of its musicians in a joyful way are not always one in the same. Competition has grown our space, and competition can wear it and our educators down. My bands have achieved on a high level, but I often wonder if the stress is worth the success. For many of our former colleagues, it is not. For many of our young colleagues, it is not. For many of our students, it is not.

Longevity is a mark of success, and as a profession we are showing signs of distress. It is time to reassess, renovate, and redesign our practices and goals. Our students deserve seasoned, experienced teachers, not just the ones who have yet to be whittled away by constant withdrawals and few deposits.

As we stand at the cusp of normalcy and the return of REAL band, it is time to shine a light on the dark corner of our profession with vulnerability and honesty.

It is time to reinvent.

Is it effective?

Is it efficient?

Is it needed?

Is it good?

Is it for the kids?

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