

Communicating With Your Administrators: How To Talk So Principals Will Listen

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For the last 10 years or so, I have been doing what has turned out to be my most requested clinic. Titled “Communicating With Your Administrators: How To Talk So Principals Will Listen,” this clinic provides some suggestions for improving the communication flow between director and administrator. As a former band director, a campus assistant principal and principal, and a district director of performing and visual arts, I have experienced this communication issue from many different angles. Although I don’t have any magic pixie dust to make the problems go away, I do have some insight on what can possibly be getting in the way of effective communication.

There appears to be a nation-wide issue with administrators just not “getting” what we do in music, or all the arts, for that matter. This is not to say that all administrators fall into this category, because there are some out there that are extremely supportive of their music programs. So, what makes the difference? I’ve noticed that this communication gap can be attributed to a number of different factors, but ***mostly it boils down to a lack of understanding on the part of the administrator about your program and a lack of a solid professional relationship between teacher and administrator. Both of these areas***

need to be nurtured on a regular basis in order to gain long-term support for your program. We generally call this advocacy, and this needs to be built into your regular routine when working with your principal. Starting only when you need something usually doesn’t pay off very well.

I think we’ve all seen that being a principal these days is not easy. There has been tremendous pressure on principals during these last two years of dealing with COVID, and as with teachers, they’ve had to figure out new ways to be successful given the demands of keeping students safe at school. Even in normal times, a principal is expected to be the instructional leader, the building manager, the master scheduler, the disciplinarian, the financial manager, the lead counselor, the evaluator, the parent liaison, the cheerleader, the safety officer....the list goes on and on. Not to mention the time spent doing hall duty, lunch duty, bus duty, attending athletic events, plays, concerts, etc. Of course, you have people helping with all of these areas, but ultimately, the principal is responsible for the safety, security, and academic success of the building. Sometimes, your job literally depends on it. I’m not taking sides here; I’m simply providing perspective that may help give some clarity and understanding of the situation at hand.

Principals want the same things: high test scores, low failure rates, safe schools, good student attendance, high teacher morale, few parent complaints, and no serious discipline problems. In most cases, the focus is always going to be on academics, and rightly so. However, we’ve all seen situations where kids were pulled out of band to do remediation in some academic class. I certainly don’t believe that this is the best decision, but as mentioned earlier, the pressure is on principals to perform. Do they want good athletic and music programs? Of course! But those are generally not the areas that will cause the greatest amount of concern, so therefore, sometimes they don’t get the attention they rightly deserve. However, principals do want to know that those teachers outside of the “core four” are also doing their part to support the academic program. If it is “just about band,” you will most likely not gain the support you need from your administration or the rest of the staff because you will not be perceived as a team player.

So, what type of administrator are you dealing with? It is important to know your audience to improve communication when trying to solve problems. Find out these types of things:

- Have they had any experience with music before, either personally as a performer, or as a principal?

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- Do they lead with their head or do they lead with their heart? If they lead with their head, they may be a “numbers person” who needs to see how music will impact learning and increase test scores. If they lead with their heart, they may already realize that music is important in providing a well-rounded education for a child.

- Have they been a principal before (or at this level)? Often times a new principal is so overwhelmed with being a new principal, they don't have the time, knowledge or desire to learn about your program.

Find the type of information that you think will make the biggest impact on your principal. What types of advocacy materials are relevant and of interest to them? What is the best approach to take and the best time to take it when addressing issues?

Next, what are you trying to accomplish? Can you find working examples in other schools or districts that you can offer up as a possible solution to your problem. Are you up on current educational issues so that you have the most up to date and accurate information available? Take ESSER funds, the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief funds. Do you know what those are? Do they know what those are? Can you build a case for requesting funds to help support your program? It's critical that you do your homework and bring some solutions to any problems you bring to your administration.

Finally, here are some general thoughts and guidelines to think about:

- **Be professional.** Do what you ask of your students: be on time, put in your best effort, have a good attitude, and get along with others.

- **Be passionate** about what you do, but be aware of the big picture. Although this cliché is sometimes over-used, being aware of the big picture is critical in understanding that it is not just about your needs and the needs of your program. That being said, you HAVE to be the cheerleader for your program and continue to address your needs and concerns in a positive, professional way.

Rick Ghinelli will present more on communicating with your administrators at the TBA summer convention.

- **Be patient and understanding.** As mentioned earlier, there are so many things for which a principal is responsible, and there is certainly a priority for getting those things done. Don't take it personally if your issue gets put on the back burner for a bit while the administration is dealing with more pressing issues. Be persistent, but professional.

- **Be involved in other activities.** Needless to say, a band director's day is incredibly busy, and you likely don't have time for “one more thing.” However, volunteering for a committee, chaperoning a dance, and engaging socially with other staff members can show that you are the team player that administrators want on their staff.

- **Continually advocate for your program** through a variety of means. Whether it be through emails, social media, other written communication, or in person, show how being involved in band has been proven to make students do better in school, resulting in the school and the district looking better, too!

Dr. James Comer, Maurice Falk Professor of Child Psychiatry at the Yale Child Study Center said, “No significant learning happens with a significant relationship.” Effective communication starts with building trust relationships and nurturing those on a regular basis. So, the grass is not always greener on the other side of the fence. The grass is greener where you tend it!

Rick Ghinelli began his career in the Spring ISD as a middle school band director and he continued his career there as an elementary assistant principal, a middle school assistant principal, and a middle school principal. In 2000, he assumed the role of Director of Performing and Visual Arts for the district, a position he held until his retirement in 2013. Rick has been active in many aspects of music education throughout his career, including serving as president of the Texas Music Administrators Conference. In 2014, Rick was awarded the Distinguished Alumnus in Music Education from the Moores School of Music at the University of Houston, and in 2019 he was honored with the TBA Lifetime Administrator Achievement Award. Currently, he serves as the Director of Music Administration Outreach and Educational Support Manager in the Division of Education for Conn-Selmer, Inc.