

Recruit ‘em, Start ‘em, Keep ‘em!

Britni Hummel

Teacher, musician, psychiatrist, counselor, mentor, comedian: the number of roles we play as band directors is already a very long one and adding “recruiter” or “retention specialist” to the list can be a huge undertaking. Even though many campuses have certain rules or limitations on what you can do to recruit for your programs, it’s still one of the more important things we do for the overall health and continuation of instrumental music education, especially with the ever-growing elective options students have to choose from now.

Get Out and be Visible!

Recruiting always begins with being visible within your feeders and your community. While putting more events on an already busy calendar can feel overwhelming, do your best to say “yes” to the events that are going to provide the most bang for your buck.

Community pep rallies or performances are a great way to showcase your students’ hard work, talent and provide visibility for part of the community that wouldn’t necessarily attend a regular band concert. I know a pep rally isn’t the most prestigious of events but if you’re asked, say yes! Volunteer to play stand tunes as people come in or do one showcase piece, getting the band and your students visible.

This is also a great opportunity to show off the *fun* that your kids are having!

Another event that is popular and effective is a series of Winter Holiday Tours. We perform some familiar holiday tunes at the elementary schools that the students can sing along with and are approachable: nothing complicated or intimidating! We talk to them a little bit about

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what it’s like to be in band, what the different instruments are, and what to listen for in the next tune. Over time, your elementary students and community will start to look forward to these performances.

Communicate!

At CPMS, recruiting in the spring becomes much more about communication to the 5th grade community and making sure that parents and elementary students have the information they need to choose from an almost overwhelming amount of electives. Remember that what most of the

community see regularly is the high school marching band which can be intimidating to a first-time parent!

Consider having a Beginner band Parent Interest meeting as the 5th grade students start to make their elective choices. In the past, we have had featured parent testimonials, student instrument demonstrations, and information about how we share kids with other activities. These things really help to dispel many common misconceptions about what middle school band looks like, especially in 6th grade!

Later in the spring semester, we go out to the elementary schools again and do a “Meet the Instruments” presentation, which involves one or two of our sixth graders from each instrument class performing for the fifth-grade classes. It’s cool and effective because the fifth graders get to see kids they recognize playing an instrument! We also talk a little about instrument choices, how they work, and wrap up with all the cool things about band.

A really great way to get them excited to try out instruments is to mail a *paper* invitation to all incoming 5th graders, regardless of elective choice. We splurge a little and put them on shiny paper in full color, so they look like a

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cool party invitation! We address them directly to the student, so they get real mail, just for them!

On the back of the invitation, we put photos of events, some quick band info and a QR code to sign up for a tryout spot. This has been widely successful for us and again takes very little time, especially when people are over saturated in email a paper letter feels special!

Swag and Social Media!

Kids LOVE swag: we see it done all the time in other departments and it's just another way to get some advertising out in the community and get kids excited to rep band. While they always love shirts, hoodies, and hats, yard signs have been one of the biggest hits.

At the end of our 5th grade Instrument Drive, the students get to visit the "band swag" table and every 5th grader gets a yard sign, a t-shirt, and their picture taken for our "Future band Stars" wall. That table is also run by a few really great current band parents so they can answer any questions and connect with our new parents. This can be really powerful to start building a connection with the student *and* the parent. Since we do this before the end of school, our band swag always stirs up more interest and helps us recruit.

Remember that the majority of what we do in middle school is behind closed doors and the more you can showcase your kids through a safe and monitored

social media platform, the better! Take photos, videos and share them with your campus, community, admin, and parents. Show them all of the cool things that your band kids are doing!

Relationships

All these recruiting efforts are a huge and necessary part of our job and can sometimes take over our focus but what happens after you recruit? Regardless if you gain 50 or 150 beginners, how do you keep them?

Students need to build relationships with their band

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directors and make friends with other band kids. If they aren't making friends in band in their 6th grade year, they will most likely make them somewhere else. It can be easy to put a ton of effort into your beginners in this department but be sure to put the same energy into your concert bands as well. It's so easy to jump into rehearsal mode, but don't forget to take the time to invest in building relationships with all of the "new" students you inherit and let them build relationships with each other.

We are also lucky enough to have our high school directors come

out once a week to our concert bands to build relationships with our 7th and 8th graders. It's all about *long* term retention. I want our middle school kids to see past what we do here and get excited for what's to come!

Success and Ownership

When students walk in the band hall, they need to feel a consistent sense of success, especially if we want them to stay. Lots of days will be hard and things will sound bad before they sound good, but keep in mind that you have the ability to define success for each kid. If 6th graders don't feel successful in your class, they won't stay. If they don't come away with strong enough literacy skills or a good embouchure set up, they won't stay. So, find ways to differentiate the learning, find ways to praise your kids and ultimately help them find success.

It isn't just about the trips and the food and the fun but the ownership of their success. Anything and everything you can give the kids ownership over is only going to allow them to invest more back into the program. Get the parents involved and let them take ownership of what you can. If you can get parents to do that, not only will you most likely retain the student, but the whole family!

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Fun Events

We try to make sure there is a fun event on the calendar once a month. This includes concerts because we hope that the music making is fun. If you need ideas on what to do with kids, there are a ton of smart and fun people out there to help out! Don't forget to think simple: a Mini-Lock In or Band Hall Movie Night can be cheap, easy and fun for the kids. They just want to hang out and be social at the end of the day. While fun is *fun*, the most important retention tools really are the "day to day" things we do.

Keep 'em

These are all things added to a long list of many but really are vital to what we do. No one else is going to advocate for our programs like we do and *all of it* starts with us. Getting kids in the door is one thing but retaining them is essential. It's our job to help create the way that kids see themselves in the future.

Britni Hummel is the Director of Bands at Cedar Park Middle School in Leander ISD and currently in her thirteenth year as a band director. During her time at Cedar Park Middle School, her bands have received consistent UIL Sweepstakes and Best in Class Honors at festivals. She guest conducted the Cedar Park Middle School Saxophone Ensemble at their Midwest International Band and Orchestra Clinic's performance in 2011. The band program was also recognized as the Texas Bandmasters Association's Exemplary Band Program in 2015. In addition, the Symphonic Band has been a consistent National Wind Band Honors Mark of Excellence winner since 2008. Most recently, the program at Cedar Park MS was selected to perform at the 2019 Midwest International Band and Orchestra Clinic and chosen as a finalist in the 2019 TMEA Honor Band Process. Prior to teaching, she received her Bachelor of Music Education degree from Texas State University in San Marcos, Texas. Britni lives in Leander, Texas with her husband David and her dog Dixie. She enjoys performing with the Cedar Park Winds Community Band, comprised of directors and teachers from the greater Austin Area. She has worked as a director at both the Texas State University and Baylor University Summer Band Camps. Her professional affiliations include the Texas Music Educators Association, where she currently serves as the Region 32 Middle School Band Treasurer, the Texas Music Adjudicators Association, and the Texas Bandmasters Association.