



Building, Re-building, or Maintaining a Successful High School Band Program

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BUILDING, REBUILDING OR MAINTAINING A SUCCESSFUL BAND PROGRAM

Clinic Notes/Handout of Joey Ashbrook, San Angelo Central High School Band

“BUILDING A SUCCESSFUL PROGRAM”- Basic steps to begin the building process of the successful program must include fundamental building blocks in several different areas to ensure you have the program off the ground and running in all areas of vital importance. In my opinion, addressing one area at a time is not as effective, moves much more slowly in the progression, and many times, will negatively impact other areas that you will eventually need to develop the overall, fully comprehensive band program. The basic areas that you need to establish to begin the forward momentum of success need to be developed simultaneously and given equal attention especially the first few years. **PROGRAM SUCCESS IS NOT and SHOULD NOT** be measured in the number of trophies, contests won, advancing to state marching, and state honor bands. Success is that program that grows from 160 students to over 300 in three years involving more young people in a positive activity. That gives ALL students a place to learn, enjoy and develop a life-long appreciation of music. Provides a positive self-esteem builder for lower level or functioning students to enjoy and realize they can be successful. Gives students, many of which have nothing positive in their lives at this point of their young years, something to be proud and to feel part of a family with a vision, goal, purpose and notoriety in the community. Some of what I now consider the most successful programs in the state, have never advanced to state marching or honor band. Some are bouncers between 1st and 2nd divisions but they have greatly and positively impacted the lives of so many students, parents and communities over the span of many years. **Identify the areas of greatest concern.** These are different for each program depending on the culture, community, administration, feeder programs, and a host of other items. The SIX FUNDAMENTAL WEAKNESSES of the Central band program immediately identified:

1. **Discipline, expectations, goal setting, motivation**

- a. Clearly communicate to students, parents, and administrators expectations and consequences **before** you meet the band for the first time. Everything from attendance policy to rehearsal behavior. Also good to make this clear in any final interviews before you accept the position. Be vigilant, strong and hold your ground. The first two days of summer band will determine the discipline and mind set of the group from that point forward. ***It is much easier to be tough and ease up than begin easy and toughen up!*** Immediately remove any students OR parents that do not fully adhere to the new, set policies and procedures. ***I believe in the tree theory.....“Cut off five and it will survive, cut off none and its life is done!”***
- b. Have written, posted, publicized clear and concise goals. Have a short plan to achieve each goal and make sure EVERY STUDENT and PARENT has them, not just the leadership, however if possible, have your student AND parent leaders involved in formulating and choosing the most important goals.
- c. Begin building internal motivation by rewarding or acknowledging improvement especially in mid – level to weak students, and begin to build relationships founded on trust, respect and a genuine care for their well-being and other areas of their lives.

2. **Support & Perception- Parent, community, student body, athletic and administrative**

- a. The very first public performance **MUST BE GREATLY EVIDENT** that the band is better! You can win over thousands of spectators, parents, student body, school leaders, drill team supporters, cheerleaders AND the coaches and players at your VERY FIRST GAME! This was our biggest and most productive success that sent us miles forward in one 10 minute half-time show. We played and cheered and yelled like crazy for the football team, played fight song intro at every first down, played so loud we caused a few miss-calls for the opposing team. We played by memory and better than ever the drill team song and had rehearsed more with them to ensure they were successful. We turned around hit the first big note of the show and musically and visually blew them away. (by contest standards of course not a great performance) It was however very exciting, fast paced and audience/student centered. Right after halftime, sent the entire drum line over right in front of our student body and played cool cadences, cheers, and got them involved. Announced all administrators and thanked coaching staff and the A.D. Our Supt. Dr. Carol Ann Bonds had pulled funding from her discretionary account to purchase new and much needed sousaphones. We made large letters to

cover the bells and spelled CAROL BONDS with the Sousas. The old saying, **“BLOOM WHERE YOUR PLANTED”** has served me well in my career as it once again did at our first game! **GIVE THEM WHAT THEY WANT, THEN TEACH THEM TO WANT SOMETHING DIFFERENT-EDUCATE AS YOU PROGRESS**

3. **Pride-student/parent/school/community**

- a. This area was pretty much conquered after the first few performances. Band students and parents were not only surprised and amazed but began to hold their heads high and vocally identify as a part of the Bobcat Band after the first halftime. The audience sat back down and did not go the concession stand, the full 10,000 home stadium gave them a standing ovation after the first song and a several minute ovation at the end of the show. Most if not all of the band came off the field in tears, including me. At the end of winning a game we were predicted to loose, the coaching staff and football team came over to the band and cheered for us. I and the Students realized we had won a major victory that night which was reinforced at all following performances.

4. **Fundamental music knowledge & skill level**-tone, technical facility, pitch discernment, music reading & theory, marching fundamentals.

- a. Although most important on most any director or music group leader's list, this was not the most important area to address to **“Bloom where we were planted”!** It was painfully evident from the first sounds played the first day of summer band, that fundamentals had not been established or even presented. The band was in much worse shape than I was led to believe and it was a frightening “uh oh” moment, especially when a great number of students referred to the concert F Scale as **“The Scale”**. We established discipline a sense of group and community pride and then the process of raising the level of playing began. Setting standards at feeder programs, with all staff, parents and students was and of course remains, more of an educational process. They just didn't know what they didn't know and once explained and a plan for growth put in place, they were and still are, most eager to improve, learn and perform!

5. **Financial support-facilities, equipment, budget**

- a. This was another “uh oh” moment as I had taken the job without seeing the inventory, or touring the facilities. After interviewing the principal and superintendent, school board president, band parents, students and walking around I-Hop and Whataburger asking anyone and everyone in there what they thought and would like to see/hear of the band, I was so convinced and excited about the potential of the program. In a whirl-wind of last minute interview, job offer, acceptance and re-location, all taking place from a Thursday to Sunday, I felt the material, capital items to be of lesser importance. I took a gamble and it is paying off. Through our new found support, and the continual education process of community and administration, we are now correcting years of non-support and an overall decay of the band department. By winning the right battles at first, I now have fewer if any and smaller giants to conquer. Once again. **“Bloom where you are planted”**.

6. **Booster Organization- community, parent, school involvement**

- a. It is imperative to get more than 10% of your booster club involved IMMEDIATELY! The more ownership parents have in the program, the stronger support and louder advocacy group you will develop to propel your band to new heights and experiences. If needed, you must start over dissolving the current club and starting a new one with the right kind of leaders and supports who share YOUR vision for the students. Do not restructure just to change, but identify weakness and needs of the booster club and work diligently to get these addressed. Some boosters will remain loyal to the “old way” and regime, but you must work to win over as many as possible, and realize the ones that are total losses and move on. You cannot and should try to please everyone, or in fact anyone in the booster club. You should work for your students and their success and when this is evident and in public visibility, you will please the parents and booster club.

Building, Rebuilding or Maintaining a Successful Band Program

Clinic Notes/ Handout by Mark Saenz Band Director Coronado High School

Maintaining a successful band program:

Leading an established band program comes with many opportunities and challenges. There is no defined career plan that states exactly how much experience is enough before you are “ready” for the job. In my case, I was lucky enough to be part of the band program for over ten years before stepping in to the lead role. At Coronado High School the students, parents, faculty, and administration are a tight family all working for the best of the program. Thanks to my mentors Kenny Capshaw, Rick and Barbara Lambrecht for instilling in me, the real reasons of doing what we do. I can’t say I still have it all of it figured out but when the opportunity came Kenny and Rick helped me to have the right mind set in leading and developing this program. It is also important to mention that I was not alone in this journey, my fellow directors Mr. Daniel Holmes and Ms. Jessica Shin have been crucial to the continued success of our program. In looking at the Coronado Band program my experience has taught me some important lessons in stepping up to the lead role of a program.

Lesson# 1 - Know the Culture - Develop a respectful environment, look around and appreciate!!

You can’t assume that you know all aspects of the program. Respecting the accomplishments and the traditions, however silly or different than what you would do, are parts of any successful program. The Coronado Band has many traditions the students and parents have during marching and concert season. Take an inventory of these traditions, and decide what these traditions add, or in some cases, take away from the program. Avoid changing too much during the first year to get a better sense of what makes the band successful. Focus on the most positive traditions and enhance them by updating them or creating a “new brand” allowing the students be part of the redesign. The little things will show the students and community that you are committed to continuing the legacy.

Lesson # 2 - Communicate, Communicate!!!

Stepping into the lead role presented me with a huge challenge of communicating effectively to all students and parents. Personally, this is an area of growth for me. For example, I struggled with justifying the need to take time away from rehearsal to speaking with the kids about the upcoming events or announcements. I learned quickly that I needed to have regular highly organized meetings with the band. Keep the meetings organized short and efficient. I did have to evolve by adding Twitter, Facebook, iCal, Charms, and redesigning our website. We added “Monday Meetings” to the program. This series of meetings includes meetings with officers during lunch and directors during the afternoon.

Lesson # 3 – Ownership - Delegate and give everyone a stake in the game.

As the assistant band director I didn’t appreciate the power of putting kids in charge of the operation of the band. My mentors were great at including the students giving them plenty of jobs to help the band. During my first year I noticed I had unknowingly taken some student duties. Not only did this add stress but it also created a separation between the leaders and directors. Many of the upperclassmen lacked the accountability because they were not involved in making things happen. Once we became aware of this problem we quickly found ways to improve the “ownership” factor. I have since focused on creating more leadership opportunities for our students such as, students scheduling the cleaning of the band room.

Lesson # 4 - Old Fashioned is not Bad

Fourteen plus years of experience has taught me that old-fashioned, tried and true methods are the best way to achieve consistent results. Another great mentor I have worked with is Ms. Ida Steadman, recently retired orchestra director of over 52 years. She taught me the value of teaching with passion and keeping things simple. Teaching the fundamentals and high expectations are just some of many things I have learned from her instruction. Don't make things too complex, teach your students to love music and learn the life lessons along the way. Everyday I remind myself to keep things simple and with a clear purpose. Set your students up for success. Create an environment where your students want to be challenged and better themselves. Above all try to focus on positives and develop the areas that need improvement.

Lesson #5 - Have a Plan - Planning way ahead makes every year better.

When taking a new position you need to expect a large amount of the job will fall in the unexpected category. Expect it, plan for it, stay flexible and roll with the punches. As events happen, use your calendar to set a reminder for next year, to plan out details of an important event or paperwork deadline. Set the reminder to repeat yearly. At Coronado we have started a Directors iCal and if there is something important coming up we have a reminder pop up on our calendar giving us the details needed to plan the event or paperwork deadline. Remember when setting up your plan, keep it simple and don't forget the bigger picture creating an environment where students are encouraged to succeed and motivated to improve everyday. Try to think of bigger goals for the program in 2, 5, or 10 years. Write them down and put them in a place where you can see them or refer back to them often.

Lesson #6 - Stop Comparing - Always look forward, and try not to live in the past.

At Coronado, the program has been lucky enough to have two of the best music educators in the state of Texas as their past directors. The history of this band programs goes as far back as 1962. Our alumni alone keep the discussions alive on how things "used to be." Remember the past but live in the present and always look to innovate and evolve the program. When things don't go as planned such as winning a contest they have always won, or not taking that trip they always took, don't panic and stick to the plan. Remind the students and parents the real reason of why we do what we do. If you and your band are doing things for the right reasons the rest will take care of itself.

Lesson #7 - Get Help - Mentors, Mentors !!!

My path has been shaped by the people I have had the honor of working with. I understand not all situations are like this but you still can reach out and develop a relationship with a more experienced local educator. This mentor does not always have to be another band director. One of my most important mentors was an orchestra director. Find a mentor that tells you what you need to hear rather than what you want to hear and schedule them regularly. At Coronado we either walk across the hall or have a mentor visiting us weekly throughout the year. It is important to note that this mentor helps provide an instructional clinic for the band but their main job is to provide the director with professional development.

Lesson #8 - Don't forget the Thank You's!!!!!!

At Coronado our parent booster organization is major part our success. These parents, like the students, need encouragement, clear directives, and communication. Several parents reached out and helped me to become more outgoing. Personally thanking every parent during games and other events is now an important part of my routine. Bottomline, parents need to be appreciated and thanked often. We have come up with several ways we recognize their hard work. Our student officers have given our volunteers holiday cards, gift cards and hand written thank you notes. Showing appreciation to our boosters is an important life lesson I believe all students and directors need to learn.

Lesson #9 - Be ready to fight for the program, be a squeaky wheel!!

Challenges to the program will come up such as, facility requests, losing teaching positions, or facing budget cuts. When these challenges come up and they will come up, be ready to step back and do not let yourself see only the negatives. Find the most positive method to present your case. Inform the parents and students and encourage the discussion to remain positive and engaging. Our administration is sometimes put in an awkward position on these matters so we all have to be careful we are not punishing the messenger. Keep the advocacy about the facts and be ready to go to bat for the program. Don't be afraid to stand up for the students. If changes do happen make the best of the situation and always look for the best. Engage your administration with as much good news as possible. Building a rapport with your administration, especially your principal, during the good times is important to overcome the challenging times. Remember your students are always looking to you for guidance if you are "bummed out" about something then they will be too and cause more problems for you in the long run.

Lesson #10 - Be Yourself

Students are smart and they can see if you are being sincere. They know if you really care about what you are teaching and if more importantly if you care about them. Make sure you find the methods and pedagogies that work for you and your style of teaching before making changes. Plan your work, work your plan, and live what you teach. When taking over a great program certain things will need to stay the same but others will depend on your personality and comfort level. Some things will be different and that's ok. Don't try be someone else. Be true to yourself and shape the program in a way that you feel is most effective. As long as you are honest, upfront, respectful, and caring to your students, changes will come about more smoothly. Teach with passion and don't be afraid to be strict with students about the little things. Live a life of striving for perfection professionally and personally. Never stop learning new things and evolving as an educator. Don't just teach! Share your own experience on learning new things. Ultimately, your goal should not be to maintain the quality of the band but evolve and enhance the overall quality of the music education experience.