

The School Band: Learning Music Through Performance

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Some years back, the Sacred Heart School Band in East Providence, Rhode Island, gave their first official performance at the school's open house. What's so unusual about that? Well, first of all, the school is not located in an area that would financially support the expense of an instrumental music program. Most of the young musicians are also not in a situation to afford the educational opportunity that comes from participating in a band program. Against many odds, our dream has come true despite what seemed like daunting challenges. Scheduling classes and the lack of a music facilities didn't slow us down.

Embracing the fact that the arts in education are best learned through hands-on experiences, what better way is there, other than singing, than to place an instrument in the hands of a beginning performer? Not only is playing an instrument "sound" music education, it provides enjoyment and brings pride to your family and school while building personal skills and values such as responsibility, dedication, and team spirit. Patiently undertaking a methodical process to instituting an instrumental music program in your school will lead to a lifetime of enriching experiences for your students.

The instrumental music program generally consists of the following band instruments: flute, clarinet, oboe, bassoon, saxophone, trumpet, french horn, trombone, baritone horn, tuba, and percussion. It is very common on the elementary and middle school level to limit instructions to those instruments which are less expensive and technical to learn. These include the flute, clarinet, alto saxophone, trumpet, trombone, and percussion. The traditional time for many schools to begin an instrumental program has been the fourth grade. I use to say that this would be the youngest age recommended to begin because of both the physical and intellectual limitations of the student. Over the years, I have taken the chance of allowing students in grade 3 who demonstrate both maturity in behavior and a great desire to learn an instrument. I have met with much success in growing the band program by doing so. One only needs to moderate expectations with the younger students and allow them to develop at their own pace. On the other hand, it is never too late to begin. Some of the most successful programs begin students during middle or high school.

One of the best ways to prepare your students for an instrumental program is to use the recorder as a "pre-band" instrument. Doing so will prepare the student in the area of music reading, breath control, and coordination. Recorders are not only inexpensive, but easily played by little fingers. One does not have to be a band instructor to teach this instrument. The general music teacher in your school can easily handle this important task. Otherwise, a few lessons by a knowledgeable musician will be sufficient in preparing someone who has a background in keyboard, strings, or voice to teach recorder to a class of beginning musicians. Recorder can become a part of the general music or arts class. I have found that students will greatly anticipate the year that they can learn the instrument. There are many recorder method books with CD accompaniments available for classroom use. You can use this "recorder year" to plan ahead for the next steps in implementing the band program.

Finding an instructor is your next step. Obviously it would be best to employ a full-time certified and experienced instrumental music educator to establish the program. If this is not possible, there are other options that may be more realistic to your situation. The step to take would be to explore all the resources in your area. This would include all private instrumental instructors who teach either from their home or in a music studio. Many music stores give group or private music lessons. Most symphony orchestras also offer educational programs to the community. You may even find qualified instructors from a local town band. You mustn't overlook both the new college graduate who is eager to gain experience or the retired music educators who is willing to teach on a part time basis.

Depending on their qualifications, you may need one instructor who specializes in woodwind and another in brass and percussion. If needed, contact your state's Music Educators Association.

Publicity and recruitment for the program should begin in the Spring. The school community must first instill enthusiasm and build interest in learning to play a wind or percussion instrument. Inviting the local junior or high school band for a performance assembly is a great start. Make sure that it includes a demonstration on the basic "starter" instruments: flute, clarinet, alto saxophone, trumpet, trombone, baritone, tuba, and percussion. Local music dealer who will be supplying rental instruments is always more than happy to come into the school and do a demonstration which should include allowing students to try producing sounds on the instrument or mouthpiece as well as see and hold the instruments. These instrument "demos" can be held during the students' general music class, or small assembly.

Music "aptitude/talent" tests are sometimes used to encourage those who score high to take up an instrument. Students demonstrating an elevated degree of tonal recognition could be directed to a more challenging instrument such as French horn. The use of such a tool is up to the director, but would never be used to discourage participation. The school's music specialist may also notice students who hold a high degree of talent or interest in music by observing them in class. These students should be especially encouraged to become part of the program. An informal student survey regarding their musical involvement outside the school, such as private music lessons on non-band instruments like piano or guitar, might reveal someone who would do very well on a wind instrument.

The choice of instrument to be studied is up to the student and may be influenced by having one that is already available to them at home or from a relative. They may also be drawn to a particular instrument because it is "small and shiny" or "big and loud!" Students will commit themselves more to learning an instrument of their choice. It is the music teacher's responsibility to help them in the selection process. It is possible that after some time of trial a student may have a need or want to switch instrument, this should not be discouraged if there is a serious reason.

The final step in the recruitment process is to have an informational meeting with the students, parents, and music dealer in order to explain the program in detail and to answer questions. Be sure to have agreement forms and rental contracts from the dealer available.

We know that Catholic school budgets are tight. That is why most music programs include an annual participation fee to cover the cost of instruction. Some students will also be paying for monthly instrument rentals. To help cut cost you can promote an instrument drive by seeking donations of quality used equipment that people may have gathering dust in the attic or closet. These instruments can be lent to students who cannot afford to rent one. Advertise in your church bulletins, local newspaper, Diocesan publications, and radio stations. Many local high schools would be glad to lend you any unused instruments with the hope that a young musician may someday become part of their band. The music director should be consulted regarding the quality of instruments that may be available for purchase. Beware of online or advertisements for inexpensive instruments. You get what you pay for and may be stuck with equipment that is not repairable.

After the program is established it would be a great idea to institute a "Music Boosters" club for parental involvement which includes fund raising. This helps build community and friendships while supporting a common educational goal. Plans should be made to purchase the larger and more expensive "school owned" instruments such as baritone horns, French horns, tubas, and percussion equipment ranging from a bass drum and cymbals, to the smaller triangles and wood blocks. Although student must obtain their own portable wire music stand, it would be a great idea to purchase the more durable stands for the music room.

Obviously the best situation in scheduling a music class would be as a selected elective as done in high school. For the elementary or junior high school this luxury does not usually exist. The first step in scheduling the program is to have the support of the classroom teachers. Most schools have a "pullout" program where the students will have a music class during the school day, it is important that the classroom teacher has input in selecting the best time for this to happen. The principal also must agree on this set time. Research has shown that pullout programs are not an academic detriment. Actually, it has been proven that studying music has a positive effect on a student's academic career.

Other options are to place music classes opposite art or gym classes. Let's not discount the time that is available before or after school hours. This is a popular time for most schools and works especially well in the lower grades where students are less occupied with after school jobs or sports. Of great importance is to have a minimum of one weekly 45 minute class by grade level with no more than 7 or 8 students. At Sacred Heart School, we have had great success with the

Remember to have presentations to showcase the students' progress to their parents and school community. Some students may even be ready to play at school liturgies. You will know when it is time to bring all the instrumentalists together to organizing your own school band. Remember to always expect the best from your young musicians while making the program fun and enjoyable. Strike up the band!

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