

Thinking Ahead

Why Recruitment and Retention are Always in Season

*I*t is the middle of the year. The old term has ended and the new semester is under way. Festivals may have either recently finished or are just looming ahead . . . or both. The school year is falling into its closest resemblance of routine. It seems an odd time to focus on matters of recruitment and retention. Isn't that something to think about again at the end of the year? Maybe not. Now, in the thick of all this activity, is the time when a program's future can be made.

by Steven J. Morrison

Recruiting and retaining students at this time of year does not necessarily mean taking on even more time and attention commitments. Maintaining and enhancing the strength of a music program is largely a matter of doing what one usually does, but doing it with an eye toward next year *and* the year after that. Things like sustaining a steady flow of musical accomplishments or feeding the social and artistic side of music participation can set a program on course for ongoing success. It is important to consider several everyday aspects of music teaching—curricular, programmatic, interpersonal, and administrative. How one approaches them in the here and now can have a large effect on what happens later.

Ensuring Success

Nothing attracts and excites students like success. All of us want to be part of something good. As educators, it is our responsibility to make sure good things happen for our students early and often. In a society that still (sort of) values delayed gratification, it is essential to think about just how delayed the gratification can be before it ceases to function as a motivator. I can make it through the gray and rainy Seattle winter knowing that eventually I'll get to the incredible summer. I can sit through a lot of *Tristan und Isolde* just to get to "Liebestod." But would a ninth grader? A fifth grader? How far off can the payoff be and still provide an incentive to persevere?

It is easy to forget that a student's "time horizon" is on a different scale from ours. For example, we understand what a powerful experience it is to perform a year-end concert on a theater stage in front of a big audience. We think to ourselves, "If the kids can just make it to the concert, they'll understand how rewarding music can be." But for a sixth grade trumpet player, that goal may seem so far in the unfathomable future as to be virtually meaningless. "You'll really enjoy band someday" is not good enough for him. Success might need to be no further away than next week or even later in the same class period. Fortunately successes do not always have to be big. Playing a "cool" new song or locking in a tricky rhythmic pattern can evoke a powerful response from a room full of young musicians. Performing at a school assembly or playing "Happy Birthday" for the principal can generate as much anticipation as more formal performance opportunities.

As important as it is to plan success for *all* students, it is even more vital to facilitate success for *each* student. You may have just finished a great rehearsal in which the violins finally mastered shifting to third position. Unfortunately, the violas, cellos and basses may not share the same level of enthusiasm. Neither does Haley, the sixth-chair second violinist who did not actually get the shift correct. Keeping close track of exactly who gets the attention and exactly who makes the achievements can help ensure that success gets spread around. Thus, spend time next rehearsal with the other sections or a few minutes at the end of class to help

Haley. If a student can leave music class believing that she is more knowledgeable, more skilled, more artistic, or simply happier than when she arrived, she is more likely to keep coming back.

A Look Into the Future

Students tend to keep moving in the right direction when they can see the next destination. The beginning of the school year is loaded with exciting new experiences—playing an instrument for the first time, singing with a bigger choir, or performing with students from other grade levels. All that is so—as a student might put it—awesome! Students get to see themselves in new ways as they acquire new skills and make music in new contexts. But after that, what is the *next* “awesome” thing?

Students may need guidance seeing the possible path ahead of them. How is senior high band different from junior high band? Why is advanced chorus any more interesting than freshman choir? A music teacher can maintain excitement and anticipation by helping students envision who they might become in a year or two. When I started playing trombone, learning simple tunes was fine. But what I *really* wanted to do was perform on the field with the high school marching band. So I did. Then I wanted to be up with the first trombones. So I did. Then I wanted to be in the jazz band . . . then be the soloist. And on it went (and still goes). With help from my band director, my older classmates, and my imagination, I could always see the next step.

The musical future can be clouded by simple things. Major transitions such as moving from one school building to another or from a familiar music teacher to a complete stranger present the greatest risk for attrition (see Delzell & Doerksen [1998] for a detailed discussion of these issues). These transitions require students to take steps they may not see clearly. Breaks in the routine, the comfortable familiarity, are opportunities for students to change course or slip through the cracks. But it is not difficult to minimize the unknown. A high school teacher mak-

ing regular visits to the middle schools, senior choir members leading sectionals with the freshman chorus, beginning string players sitting in with the eighth grade orchestra . . . these are just a few ways to help lift the fog of uncertainty and shine a bright light on how making music is an ongoing and ever-changing experience.

Building a Community

After years of advanced study and professional experience as musicians and educators, it is natural for us to view music making as the heart and soul of the school ensemble experience. But students typically cite social factors as the most important aspects of school music participation (for more about this in students’ own words, see Adderley, Berz, & Kennedy [2003]). This is not cause for alarm. Music making is a social activity as well as an artistic one. The health of a band, choir, or orchestra as a social unit can contribute immensely to its success as a musical unit.

Many students elect music because their friends do. Other students choose it because they want to be part of a group. Still others choose it because of the fun not-like-the-rest-of-school things the music classes get to do. Ensembles are more than courses or organizations. They are communities complete with a history and tradition; they have a leadership structure and hierarchy, whether formal or informal. Students come to identify themselves with their music activities—for example, they may be “choir people” or “jazzers.” Once a young musician sees himself as an ensemble *member*—rather than simply as someone who takes an ensemble class—it is far less likely that he will decide to abandon it.

So while we are busy assessing the musical progress of our classes, it is a good idea to evaluate how well they are performing as social groups. Are students hanging around the music room during lunches or free time? Are our students interacting with each other outside music class? Do graduates of the program return to check out how things are going?

Have we fostered a classroom atmosphere where students believe they are cared for and respected? Do we allow them opportunities to contribute to some aspect of decision-making? In short, is the music room a place students want to be and want to stay?

Meeting Time

Sometimes the opportunity to join or the possibility to stay part of the music program is out of our students’ hands. Course requirements, school restructuring, or schedule conflicts may jeopardize their future as musicians. The decisions that lead to these kinds of obstacles are being made now as various groups and committees plan the road ahead for the school community. The best way to prevent well-intentioned new policies from compromising the music program is to actively participate in the decision-making process. Admittedly, no music teacher needs another committee meeting to attend. Nevertheless, the benefits gained by participating in discussions about a school’s future often far outweigh the investment of time and energy. Only a member of the music staff can offer the perspective and expertise that will allow curricular or structural changes to complement—or at least not overlook—the needs of the music program.

Just as formal administrative participation can keep the music program positioned well, informal administrative work can be just as productive. It is troubling when we find that Andy, one of our most seemingly committed students, has not signed up for next year’s band. We are disappointed when Anika, a student who asked about joining orchestra, ultimately does not. Registration happens early and situations like these often benefit from immediate and individual attention.

“Andy, I didn’t see you on the class list. Is there a conflict we can fix?”

“I’m glad to hear you are interested in orchestra, Anika. Let’s visit the counselor right now to figure out your schedule.”

If Andy did not know that band and French actually *can* be taken in the same term or Anika was uncertain about

exactly *how* to sign up for orchestra, it can be remedied by a minor administrative intervention that produces major results in the lives of these students.

Is all this to say that maintenance of a strong music program takes care of itself? If we just pay attention to the small things—the “normal” things—will the flow of students just continue uninterrupted? No. But neither is it true that recruitment and retention stand apart from everyday music teaching. Students make decisions about their musical futures all the time, even deep in the middle of the school year. Attracting and retaining young musicians is the result of successes we facilitate, opportunities we provide, the environment we foster, and the part we play in the larger school community.

References

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