

Focusing on the Classroom: Recruiting and Retaining Students

Quality in a music program is dependent on a high rate of returning students and a reliable feeder network. With many courses competing for the same students, recruiting enough students to keep instrumental and vocal programs healthy is essential. It is the educator's responsibility to sell students and their parents on the value of signing up for an elective course in music.

Taking Action through Positive Experiences

- Among the reasons offered by parents and youngsters for NOT participating in music are a failure to be told about the nature and benefits of ensemble participation; lack of information about costs and available instrument rental plans; and concern over the amount of time that must be devoted in order to participate successfully.
- Music educators are challenged to provide a program that can successfully compete with the many demands on student time both in and out of school. Additionally, many administrators and school boards base their budget decisions on student numbers. A static or declining enrollment may doom music departments to static or declining budgets, staff reductions and reduced course offerings. Recruiting and retaining as many students as possible is vital. Without recruiting, public school music could disappear. You play the crucial role in this ongoing process.

First Performance, ASAP

We can remember the excitement of our first performance: The dress requirement, being the center of attention but with the security of the group, the applause of the audience—these are all memories that last a lifetime. You will never have a more enthusiastic group of performers and audience members than beginning music students and their parents, and an initial concert early in their development can ensure a strong program with a great deal of support.

The objectives of First Performances are fourfold:

- To reduce your beginner drop-out rate
- To provide short-term incentive goals
- To encourage communications with parents
- To further strengthen administrative support of your program

The first concert should be presented between the second and third month of the school year and students should be ready to demonstrate the first five notes. On the first night of the rental program, announce the date. The concert should be approximately 20 minutes long and take place in an informal setting.

The best “First Performances” have parents participate actively. This is a time to help parents understand the value of establishing good habits such as practicing with a good chair and music stand; encouraging regular practice with practice sheets; caring for the instrument; and breathing and bowing techniques.

To help organize the First Performance Concert, an action kit is available from the Music Achievement Council at www.musicachievementcouncil.org. The kit contains all of the concert support materials you will need, including:

- A sample letter to parents
- A sample letter to administrators
- A poster to announce the performance
- A program blank
- A complete 20-minute concert, which includes parts for all instruments (uses only five notes—concert B-flat to F in whole, half and quarter notes and rests)

All you need to supply is:

- Someone to serve as an announcer
- Programs to be handed out as souvenir copies
- Light refreshments are optional

District-wide Concerts

Most successful ensemble programs use a district-wide concert as a promotional activity to give their students, parents, administration and community an enjoyable overview of the music program. The objectives of this event are to:

- Showcase student achievements
- Create interest in music and music education
- Increase communication with parents, administration and the community
- Strengthen administrative support
- Improve recruiting and retention rates

An all-district concert is a great public relations tool because it provides the community with a “musical snapshot” of the sequence of instruction from elementary through high school. In 90 minutes, students and parents see firsthand how far they’ve come and where they are going.

Informances

Every performance should have an “informance” component. While you are exciting youngsters about music, you are informing the parents about the value of an education in music. Written materials that explain the value of music in improving student achievement and self-esteem should be shared with the audience. This can take the form of short statements or quotes, or full-page program inserts detailing the latest findings of reliable research. The selection introduced through the informance can be showcased at a future concert, thus giving insight into the “before” and “after” music education process. Consider including a rehearsal and/or sight-reading component as part of your concert so the audience can gain a better understanding of the ensemble development process.

Getting Them into the Program

Fifth grade is typically the year that students are provided with the first opportunity to participate in public school instrumental programs. Creating a desire to participate in the programs begins with third and fourth grade students. To enhance the recruiting process, ensemble teachers need to work in partnership with general music teachers and classroom teachers. Teachers should work with students by using recorders; invite potential students to concerts; perform concerts at the elementary school; and provide demonstrations for students in the lower grades. Young students will remember what they saw and heard. If it’s good, they will want to be a part of it, so make these performances meaningful and age-appropriate.

Keeping Them in the Program

It is important to recruit effectively, but it is even more important to keep students in the music program. The Gemeinhardt Report identifies that the No. 1 reason students leave a music program is the fear of failure. Recruiting assemblies, joint concerts, parent meetings and activities to increase retention during the elementary/middle school and middle school/high school transitions are some of the ways to boost enrollment. Remember, “You can’t push a rope. You can only pull it.” The best way to guarantee that students will remain committed to the program is to provide inspirational leadership in an exciting musical experience.

*To learn more, you can visit www.musicachievementcouncil.org to order your copy of *The Practical Guide to Recruiting and Retention*, which has assisted educators in a variety of challenging environments to build and maintain successful music programs.*

Want more tips for keeping music strong in your schools?

Visit the site devoted to all things music advocacy: www.supportmusic.com

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