

## Paying Attention to Retention – The Three Rs

The academic year is coming to a close. All seems to be going well with your school's band program. Your ensembles' instrumentation is reasonably well-balanced, and you feel students made progress during the term. Concerts were well attended, you received positive adjudication during festival season, and your principal seems happy with the work you have done. You're looking forward to working with these same students again next year or feeding them to your fellow directors.

Then you hear a knock on your office door. Two students come in to tell you that they've decided to drop band. If that weren't bad enough, they tell you that several others have decided to drop out next year, too! Your spirit and enthusiasm plummet and you take it personally. What went wrong? You ask yourself, "what could I have done to prevent this?"

Of course, some students leave music due to circumstances beyond your control—and often theirs. But it is also a time to look forward (not backward) and aim higher. As you do, consider these Three Rs of Retention—sure-fire strategies to help ensure students remain active in your school's music program, and beyond.

### **Retool Rehearsals**

Students often recall concerts and festivals as the highlights of their school music experiences. The problem is, those moments account for only a tiny fraction of your time with them. Most of it takes place in rehearsal. So, if the rehearsal process is not a place of magical music-making, chances are you will lose students.

Author and music educator David Newell sums it up best: "What happens during each and every ensemble rehearsal is the MASTER KEY that unlocks the box labeled 'Student Retention'... It is the daily classroom experience that keeps students in the music program! The beautifully-crafted, aesthetically-driven, well-planned and fast-paced rehearsal is the key to keeping students in our performance ensembles."<sup>1</sup>

Be sure every rehearsal gives ALL students the chance to play their instruments in a satisfying way, beginning with chorales and unison materials—both technical and melodic. When rehearsing literature, avoid getting bogged down in details that involve only a few students...deal with those issues in sectionals or private lessons. Otherwise, whenever possible, engage students even when they are not playing. ("Woodwinds and brass, conduct a 4/4 beat pattern as the percussion play measures 17–24.") Conclude each rehearsal with music-making that allows every student to feel good about that day's experience. (Who wants to hear the bell ring as you are explaining a trill to the clarinets?) And throughout...less talk, and more playing. When you do verbally "teach," address EVERYONE, introducing concepts and skills to the entire band.

### **Rethink Repertoire Selection**

At various times, all of us as directors are guilty of two flaws in our repertoire selection that sabotage our efforts to grow our programs. First, we choose music based on what we

think will “entertain” our students rather than touch their souls. Second: we choose repertoire that is just too difficult, rationalizing that a harder piece will create a more spectacular and thus more positive outcome (and prove to our egos that we have a superior program). The truth is, however, that all students really want is to sound great. Creating beautiful sounds is fun and motivating; students know when they don’t sound good and that’s NOT fun—it’s frustrating and a turn-off.

When choosing repertoire, focus on challenging students musically more than technically. Select pieces that match their mastery of fundamentals learned during lessons, sectionals, and the warm-up stage of the rehearsal. When a student looks at repertoire in the folder, no notes, rhythms, or symbols should be unfamiliar. If this is the case, the repertoire rehearsal (and performance experience) becomes one of joyous music-making, not frustrating struggle. Playing in band will become a continually-satisfying musical experience rather than a series of vexing (and drop-out producing) episodes.

### **Recommit to a Culture of Excellence**

There is no substitute for excellence. Like any other academic subject, band should be taught with high but realistic expectations, not watering down instruction due to a fear of scaring kids away. The human creature wants to be a part of a quality group—we want to progress; we want to succeed. Organizations of every type with a tradition of excellence attract and retain members. Does your band program offer students intrinsic motivation by giving them the chance to be a part of a quality ensemble—to make beautiful musical sounds with others?

### **Bringing it All Together**

Of course, making the Three Rs work for your program isn’t easy. It takes one not-so-secret ingredient: ENTHUSIASM. Think of the music teachers who have most influenced your career. Wasn’t a common denominator that they were all devoted, passionate, and at their core, loving—and determined to share those qualities enthusiastically with every student. Thankfully, these qualities are usually reciprocal, as our students provide us with the fuel to keep us going, growing, and glowing. Maybe there’s a fourth R of Retention: RELATIONSHIP.

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1. Newell, David. *The Rehearsal*, Kjos Music Press, 4382 Jutland Drive, San Diego, 2015, p. 4.