

The Challenges and Rewards of Small Band Programs

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Like many directors, I spent my early years of teaching at a relatively small school in a relatively small town. During those years I couldn't help but have thoughts like, "my job would be so much easier at a bigger school" or "if only I had four more trumpets..." or "I wish I had the money that those larger bands have." In the summer of 2005 I became a director of one of those larger bands. To say that I experienced a culture shock would be a huge understatement. It was during this first year at Center Grove High School that the joys of my previous teaching experience at Norwell High School became magnified AND any frustrations I had became more and more difficult to remember. I don't regret making the career move that brought me to a larger school, but being removed from the small band environment has allowed me to more appreciate the challenges and rewards of that experience.

All band programs share the same challenges, no matter what the size.

Just a few examples:

- Money
- Recruiting
- Resources
- Rehearsal time
- Scheduling
- Boosters

Unique challenges for small bands (to name a few)...

- I. **Money** is one of the most common challenges for any size band program, but for small schools it is particularly difficult. Many expenses (drill, music, staff, designers) operate independently of size. Drill and music usually don't cost more for larger bands, but smaller bands generate less fee money to cover this same cost because they have fewer students.
- II. Fewer students mean fewer parents. Fewer parents means not as many **volunteers** for band booster events. At almost every school it is a small group of devoted parents that do the bulk of the work...but at small schools that group becomes even smaller.
- III. **Recruiting and good instrumentation** are challenges for every school, regardless of size. But at a small school one bad year can more drastically affect the band for several years. One year of too many flutes and NO brass can cause several more years of balance and instrumentation headaches. The effect of every student that quits is felt much more in a small band.

This presentation will address a few of the common challenges that face small school band programs and tips on possible ways to use size to your advantage....or at least ways to make the best of it. These tips and pieces of advice are merely a collection of some ideas that have worked in my teaching environment. They worked with my own particular philosophies and teaching style. I know that you are not teaching in the identical teaching environment that I had, but the overall concept is the same: use the size of your band and community to your advantage. Embrace and enjoy the unique qualities of a small band!

Budget

- I. Band is often a larger source of community pride.
 - Higher percentage of businesses are more likely to assist with sponsorship or donations
 - School board might support band more in smaller community
 - Fundraisers supported more by the community
 - Higher percentage of parents more involved in fundraisers

Money is always an issue, but smaller schools do have the advantage of generally being more important to the community it serves. It has been my experience that fundraisers are supported more at small schools. Events that combine concerts and food are usually great ways to get donations. The events can also quickly become small town traditions. Use these to your advantage and find other ways to create community wide events. In general, more people know YOU in a small town. Use that to your advantage. Get to know your school board, business owners, and community leaders. You might be surprised how much more support can come your way.

Band Boosters

- I. Small town band parents are GREAT!
 - Many will do anything for you
 - Greater understanding of how each individual is so important
- II. Alumni support
 - Small town kids are always willing to come back and help
- III. Personal connection
 - They know you better

Behind every strong band program is a strong booster program. It is essential to your ability to raise money and provide volunteer support for band activities. I have found that smaller schools have a higher percentage of parent involvement. Find out what your parent's strengths are – and use them. I am always amazed at the variety of talent and resources that exist in booster organizations. Hopefully you will find that the parents are anxious to play an important part of their son or daughter's band experience.

Recruiting

- I. Bigger fish in a smaller pond
 - Your band can be famous
- II. The community and young students know who you are
- III. Easier to work with elementary and middle school feeder programs
 - Perform at least once a year for elementary and middle schools
 - Activities for 8th graders to get involved with high school
 - join high school for a marching band competition or football game
 - have a side-by-side concert of "pops" music

Some tips for effective recruiting...

- Be involved in the community
- Get in the news
- What is your band's reputation?
- Work WITH teachers and administration
- Make it clear – what's in it for them?

It is important to **develop relationships** with the entire community. This allows you to establish trust between you and the elementary schools, middle schools, and the students. When the community sees positive things happening in your program they will be more likely to encourage the students to at least TRY band. Elementary teachers are usually very happy to promote band to their students if they see that

students are having a valuable experience and LEARNING. Middle school is that critical time to establish bond of trust with your students. 7th and 8th graders are generally skeptical of anything coming from a teacher. If they feel like they can trust you (notice I didn't say like you), they are much more likely to continue their music education with you. In high school students have so many activities to choose from. What are you doing to make band a worthwhile use of their time? What is the reputation of band in your high school? Is it an exclusive club or a welcome place for everyone? Does the band support all aspects of the school – including athletics, academics, and social events? What do you do to make students proud to be in band? Always remember that everything you do influences your recruitment and retention...even more so at a small school. That also includes how you interact with teachers, coaches, administrators, and non-band students.

Concert Band

- I. You have a greater opportunity for individual attention
- II. You have the advantage of being the only one in front of them
- III. Program to your strengths
- IV. Take advantage of...
 - Chamber music
 - Solo recitals
 - Honor Bands
 - Concert Band festivals
- V. Do something different
 - Concerts “in the round”
 - Open rehearsals with guest clinicians
 - Chamber music or concerto competitions
 - Jazz dinners
- VI. Teach PASSION for music and excellence
 - Is it obvious to everyone?
 - Are you consistent?

GET OUTSIDE THE BAND ROOM!

Concert Band is the single most important thing we teach – it is the ensemble we spend the most time rehearsing. BUT it is usually the least visible of all our music ensembles. Do whatever you can to get the music making process OUT of the band room. Do your students know that music can exist outside of those four walls? Get your students involved in anything that will allow the community, parents, administration, and other non-band kids to see them perform. Consider performing the same music at multiple places and concerts. Take a tour of local churches, elementary schools, and performing venues. Does the administration know what goes on inside the band room? Invite them to observe as much as possible!

Pep Band

- I. Pep band is the most visible ensemble you have – take advantage of that!
 - Can you get school or athletic department \$\$ support?
- II. Are you there out of obligation or are you genuinely supporting the school?
- III. Make it fun
 - Be creative
 - Be actively involved in the game

- IV. Ideas for small bands
 - Amplification
 - Use keyboards, guitar, bass
 - Feature soloists
- V. Music selection
 - Consider using rock jazz charts – they usually allow you to sound bigger
 - Pick current music and add guitar

USING ELECTRONICS FOR PEP BAND

Placement

The best location is on the floor or low in the stands directly at either end of the gym. Consider using risers instead of bleachers. This gives you more flexibility of placement and equipment. I tend to use a set-up that is similar to a jazz band, except that I stack the high brass and low brass front to back instead of a row of high brass and a row of low brass. This seems to work better with the microphone placement.

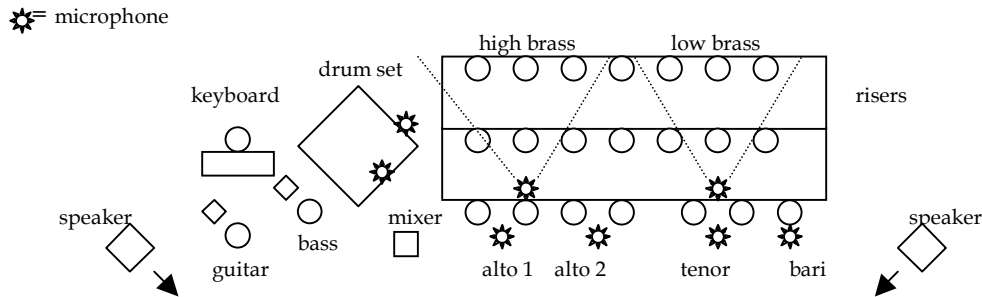
If you are lucky, you might have a gym with a descent PA system. To help get your sound throughout the gym you can run out from your mixer into the gym PA. Don't turn this up too loud, it can quickly get annoying to those fans that just want to talk.

Equipment

You can make this work with minimal electronic equipment. I started with a couple microphones and one amplifier and just kept adding on. Don't be afraid to dive in, even if you don't know anything about electronics. Find a parent or student that might know enough to get you going. Is there a local electronics dealer that can help you set up the first time?

Start small and add on as needed. You may need to add more microphones, a larger mixer, monitor speakers, an additional keyboard for special effects, larger speakers, and more cables. Ideally your minimal equipment would include at least the following:

- 5 Shure SM 57 microphones (these are good for saxes or individual instruments)
- 2 or more "area" condenser microphones (these pick up a sound from a larger area)
- 1 kick drum microphone
- 6 microphone stands (use the kind with telescoping arms)
- 1 eight channel powered mixer board
- 2 large, powered speakers. I have found that the Mackie 3-way speakers work well. (speakers are one of your biggest expenses, but also the most important – remember, you want to produce a "good loud" not "bad loud")
- At least 10 XLR microphone cables
- At least 4 quarter inch cables
- 2 direct boxes for guitar and bass inputs from their amps to the main mixer



Advantages of this kind of pep band:

- You can sound big and fill up the gym without having to blast.

	basketball court	
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- You can feature strong individual musicians
- You will actually hear woodwinds

Disadvantages

- This does take a while to set up and tear down, so have students who are willing to help
- It takes a few times to get the balance dialed in just the way you want it
- Possible electrical problems or feedback issues

MARCHING BAND DESIGN TIPS FOR SMALL BANDS

I. Don't TRY to be a big band

- Don't try to play just as loud
- Don't try to take up the whole field

II. Do what the big bands can't do

- Create intimate moments
- Stronger individual marching
- Achieve better clarity

Utilizing your music strengths

I. Choose the right music

- What will your students enjoy and learn from?
- What do you feel passionate about teaching?
- What CAN you play well?
- Who is your audience?

Be careful – remember that you will not sound the same as the original recording. Be realistic about what you will be able to accomplish in terms of volume or energy. Try to find music that is unique to your band and what they can do well. Work to find music that will feature your strongest sections, even if that is your flutes and clarinets. Try to find something that will create something different than what everyone else is doing.

II. What are the strengths of your ensemble?

- Are you able to play expressively?
- Are you able to play extremely technical passages?
- Can you show off tone quality and intonation?

III. Be creative

- Think outside the traditional marching band box
- What will set you apart from everyone else?

IV. Percussion

- What fits your style of music?
- Do you really need a drumline?
- Are there other instruments you could feature besides the traditional marching instruments?

Music Technology

Music technology in marching band has become common in the last ten years. Many marching bands are now using synthesizers and other amplified electronic instruments to create more color and interesting textures in their music. Here is a basic list of common uses of music technology:

I. Microphones

- Allows you to feature softer instruments (like clarinet and flute)
- Use wireless microphones and use soloists to create a strong visual interest
- Use microphones to amplify your mallet instruments so they can contribute more to overall ensemble texture

II. Synthesizers

- Provide strong harmonic support underneath your ensemble
- Provide other sound effects
- Provide bass support
- New textures and color possibilities

III. Electronic drum pads

- Programmable to produce a wide variety of sounds
- Can be mounted on drum carriers

IV. MIDI samples

- Import any recorded sound into a keyboard. That sound can be initiated by the stroke of a single key. This allows you to recreate prerecorded voices, historical speeches, or any musical or non-musical sound.

V. Electronic instruments

- Electric orchestral string instruments
- Electric wind instruments
- Electric mallet instruments – programmable to produce any keyboard sound

Some people debate the increasing use of music technology in the marching band activity. Technology should not replace the student performer or rob them of the opportunity to learn through the act of producing the music the traditional way. Technology can be used to enhance the performer's ability to create and be expressive without the limitations of the traditional marching band. Just remember – technology should ADD to the ensemble, not replace the ensemble.

Utilizing your visual strengths

I. What do YOU do well?

- Fast marching
- Body movement
- Technique

Small bands can really excel at new and interesting body movement or choreography. This can create great moments for your visual ensemble. Use space to your advantage, but don't feel like you need to take up the whole field. No matter what, remember that the primary job of your drill is to make sure your ensemble SOUNDS good. Don't sacrifice music for drill.

II. Creating your stage

- Tarps can give you areas of focus or create negative space
- Props can shrink your field and provide a stronger sense of identity, but make sure there is actually a point for your props. If at all possible, interact with the props.
- Try to keep your "stage" three-dimensional, two-dimensional props or backdrops flat along the back of the field tend to look stagnant and do not create an interesting texture to your field. Work to create depth.

Develop your band's identity

Every ensemble needs to have a strong sense of identity. This is especially true of small bands. It seems as if most small bands just try to emulate larger bands or drum corps. This usually does not work well. What are you and your ensemble most proud of? Find your niche. Find those things that you feel passionate about, pass those on to your students, and then use anything you can to make those things obvious to your audience. What can the audience learn to expect from your ensemble when they take the field?

THE MOST IMPORTANT ADVANTAGE OF SMALL BANDS...

STRONG RELATIONSHIPS

Without a doubt, the one thing I miss most about teaching a small band is the relationships you form with those students and parents. At the end of a hard day at a small school you can usually count on at least one caring student to come into your office and cheer you up with a friendly chat. At the end of a concert, you can usually count on at least one parent telling you how much they enjoyed it and how much they appreciate YOU. No matter how difficult the teaching job is, teaching at a small school has a way of making you feel like it's all worth it. You KNOW that you are having a strong effect on these student's lives.

I. Every student...

- Knows (feels) they are important to the ensemble
- Knows each other
- Can be a strong POSITIVE influence

II. The director actually knows everyone

- You know individuals well enough to read them accurately
- You know their music and marching tendencies
- Stronger relationships mean it easier to motivate them - you know what really gets them going

III. Stronger family connection

- The band family is undeniably stronger at a small school
- There is a strong sense of watching out for each other

IV. Higher highs and lower lows

- Everything just seems to mean more in smaller bands
- Your accomplishments are magnified because they were harder to achieve

V. You (the director) get...

- ...a great sense of satisfaction
- ...to "drive the bus".
- ...the sincere appreciation of your students and parents
- ...a program that is a direct reflection of you (whether you like it or not)

...BUT BE CAREFUL

- Don't over-burden your students, it's so easy to do that at a small school
- Keep it healthy - for you and your students

- Don't let band become a "cult". Too many directors let their bands become isolated from the rest of the school to the point that the band is viewed negatively. Encourage your students to do other things, to keep balance in their lives, and to make friends outside of band. They will thank you for it when that time comes when high school band is over.
- Don't seclude yourself from new ideas and other colleagues. Directors at larger schools have the advantage of motivating each other, pushing each other, and learning from each other. It is too easy at a small school to become isolated from new ideas. Keep learning!

If you teach a small band at a small school, remember to stop and appreciate what you have. The grass is not always greener on the other side of the fence. Yes, many things are more difficult to achieve for a small program...but there are also so many advantages that you might be taking for granted.

Enjoy the Small Band Teaching Environment!