

RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION STRATEGIES

Recruitment and Retention Strategies For Instrumental Students in Urban School Districts

Rachel C. Ficca

The University of the Arts

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RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION STRATEGIES

Approved as to style and comment by:

Dr. Jenny L. Neff

Dr. Jenny L. Neff, Division Chair of Music Education

Micah Jones

Micah Jones, Dean of the School of Music

Erin Elman

Erin, Elman Dean of Professional Studies

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Abstract

For many band directors before they even think about instruction for the school year, they have to start strategizing for recruitment and on top of that engage and encourage the students who are currently in their program. On top of that, urban schoolteachers face more of a challenge when it comes to simple factors such as providing method books or raising money for equipment. The purpose of this study was to investigate strategies to support recruiting students for instrumental music, then continuing into methods for retention in instrumental music from grades 4th-8th in urban school districts. In this study students and parents were surveyed and results were compiled and analyzed to find common factors that have deemed successful in their program.

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Recruitment and Retention Strategies For Instrumental Students in Urban School Districts

The excitement in a child's eyes when they get to open up their instrument case for the first time. Admiring the beauty of the metals and how the light reflects off, anxious to make their first sound. “Wow” is just an understatement of what they are thinking. After the first lesson your students are so excited to go home and show their parents what they learned. The lessons continue and the pressure starts to kick in. For some students the excitement starts to fade and turns into frustration. Eventually other factors come into play, payments are harder to manage for the parents, and students realize the amount of work you have to contribute to play an instrument, or do not have parental support at home. Unfortunately this is the truth for many urban districts.

In urban districts there are many lower socioeconomic students and these students face multiple challenges daily. Due to their daily struggle, extra curricular activities like band are very hard for them to come by. Instrument fees, repairs, method books, expenses for field trips. Urban instrumental teachers have to think outside the box just so lower socioeconomic students can participate in their program. Not only do those teachers have to gain students, but also they have to continue to encourage their students to stay in the program. After extensive reading and research I have gathered what I think are the most important methods when it comes towards recruitment and retention. I hope by the end you may have found a strategy that you can incorporate to help strengthen and grow your program.

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Recruitment and Retention

Building any type of program is easier said than done. Days of planning, strategies and methods are thought out down to the last detail. Through my research I found from band directors all over the United States their different strategies and methods of recruitment and retention. The research was gathered and organized into similar categories and top factors were chosen.

Strategies for Recruitment

Having a message to promote your program makes your program look desirable. Using words such as, “successful”, “high achievement”, “outstanding” can really draw someone's attention. Providing logistical information in your message: who can join, materials that are needed, when and where new members' informational meetings and rehearsals are held, how much it costs to participate (Hanson, 2018). Also according to Hanson (2018), “Every child should have the opportunity to learn, participate in, understand and appreciate instrumental music. We hope that you will be able to afford your child this once in a lifetime experience.” (p. 5). After finding many different recruitment messages many of their statements recruiters promoted extrinsic elements such as teamwork and friendship.

A bigger statement that was found during my research and it came up in almost every article was building a relationship. This might be an obvious item for instrumental teachers, but in many urban districts this hits top of the list. Building relationships are more important for those who live in poverty. As educators we know that we have to build a safe environment for our students. Many students with lower socioeconomic status have trust and self esteem problems. Consistently encouraging and persisting can help build students self-esteem. “Remember kids all want the same thing: they want to be heard and respected, and valued, and

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listened to, and loved.” (Bernard, 2010, pp. 53-57). It can be so easy to be cooped up inside your classroom all day, being present outside your classroom will make students feel more comfortable and will want to join your group.

The students aren’t the only ones you should be building relationships with, Kevin Mixon has “found that building collegial relationships by getting involved in other classrooms and activities is also invaluable in securing time for my program.” (Mixon, 2005, pp. 15-23). In many instrumental programs students will need to leave during class time to go to their lesson or band rehearsal. If you have the support of the classroom teachers it will make scheduling and allowing students to miss class time less stressful. Having a strong relationship with your colleagues can help build and advocate for your program.

Don’t shortchange your students. It is very easy to dismiss children and underestimate their intelligence. Recognize their potential. I read that many teachers in urban districts mistakenly overlook urban students and believe they are less capable than other children. But the reality is that urban students are more than capable (Bernard, 2010). We all know that music educators take great pride in their students' accomplishments and this is their opportunity to try something new. Perform for your community or elementary schools, get your ensembles out and show what your students are capable of. When you interact with the elementary students and create an appealing and enjoyable experience for the students, they will perceive your program as “cool” and will want to be a part of something like that (Daniel, 2006). “Recruitment is not just based on performances, but how students perceive the performing groups.” (Albert, 2006, pp.53-72).

Building relationships is important, but no one will know about your program unless you get exposure. As simple as performing for your elementary schools, to getting out into the

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community and creating publicity. Publicizing the students' achievements could potentially turn people's perceptions of urban districts into more positive ones. The unfortunate truth is that many community members along with teachers have a negative perception towards lower socioeconomic districts. Offering an "Instrument Petting Zoo" will get students out and trying the instruments to see which is best for them. Even having apparel for current members of your program to wear around school. "Apparel not only helped with advertising and recruiting efforts, but contributed a sense for band members." (Albert, 2006, p. 60).

Strategies for Retention

You started your program and now we have to keep our students involved and engaged, and sometimes this is easier said than done. Many of the strategies that I have researched will connect with recruiting. As stated with recruiting you will want to consistently encourage and persist students along with frequent praise and continuing to build on self-esteem. Playing an instrument is no easy task. Many students are vulnerable and are scared that other students may judge. Urban teachers are more likely prepared for this task, building trust with your students and showing them that you are dedicated and committed to them. Fostering these positive relationships and interactions keeps students in instrumental programs. Students can see right through the fake ones (Daniel, 2006). Be real with them. Your attitude towards your program could make all the difference. Quantitative research reveals that participants considered the skill of "showing the care and concerns for students' lives outside the classroom" to be significantly more important in an urban school setting (Fitzpatrick, 2011). Immediate feedback and praise may go a long way for students living in poverty. In my experience the smallest reward could potentially encourage a student to work harder. Yes you are praising them, but make sure that

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they are recognizing their own successes. Set achievable goals for your students in lessons and rehearsals.

Students are constantly evolving and adjusting to society, any teacher will tell you that their philosophy has also evolved as well. As a music educator you want to strive to keep experiences culturally relevant. Forming different ensembles to keep students engaged and interested. You've got to start with "their" music. Urban schoolteachers are usually working with students representing multiple ethnicities. When they see that you are invested in their music most urban students will be more motivated to remain in ensembles that represent their culture (Mixon, 2005). Building nontraditional groups like percussion ensembles, rock bands or other specialized ensembles might take some creativity and research. Going out to conferences can help with starting beginner, intermediate and advanced non-traditional ensembles. Even with your traditional band and orchestra ensembles you should maintain that cultural relevance.

Thinking beyond your program outside support groups could help amplify your instrumental programs. Research has shown that parental support plays a role in the retention of students. Kinney (2010) stated that parent support was a significant factor in predicting retention and that parental support was lacking in urban districts. Support from the home is crucial, and many parents have different opinions about performing groups and they may not deem it necessary or important for their child (Mixon, 2005). Start with positive communication. At the beginning of the year, outline your expectations and goals that their child will accomplish this year. Just like with the students you want to build that positive relationship to help bridge the gap. For example transportation can cause problems especially in urban districts where there just is not enough funding to bus children to rehearsals. This is where your parental involvement comes into play, having parents carpool children to and from rehearsals and performances.

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Parents as taxpayers can be extremely influential in their child's education towards deciding what their tax dollars should go towards (Albert, 2006).

Administrative support can make or break your program. Educators know without the support of your administrators it may not be possible. "When administrators do not value the development of instrumental music programs, they may have a similarly negative effect." (Fitzpatrick, 2011, pp. 229-256). Funding from administrators is not only critical, but also necessary. Instruments and various equipment need to be purchased for an instrumental program. We all know that urban districts are inadequately underfunded. And you never know what is going to happen to your program due to budget cuts or other factors. Keeping your principal informed about your program and the importance behind it may help you avoid any unexpected changes in the future. Administrators not only help with funding, but ensure rehearsal, lesson times and proper spacing (Mixon, 2005).

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My Research

I currently work as one of the elementary band directors in the Pottstown School District. Our program has taken many hits over the past 20 years. While it is not currently taking a major hit in funding or cuts our program has been slowly chipped away. Pottstown School District is underfunded millions of dollars every year. The band program still stays strong with administrative, parental and community support, but how long can we really hold on. This year has been a tough year for not only parents, but also my students and me. We went through multiple different transitions, but the one thing that brought us together was creating music. I am so proud of my students for accomplishing this year and pushing through even when times were extremely difficult. This research has opened my eyes on how I can make my teaching strategies better for my students and the community in the next school year.

Student Responses

A survey was sent out to my students who are either currently enrolled in my program or were formally enrolled in my program. Students from grades 4th through 8th were asked anonymously to answer questions specifically why they chose to sign up for band and why they have continued to participate.

Reading through the responses I was very surprised about the responses. My first question I asked was why they decided to participate in the band program. The top responses were that they wanted to try something new or play an instrument along with their parents or family members who were also involved with the band program (Appendix A, Column 1). Family support and influence was a significant factor when it came to recruitment and retention for instrumental programs when I was doing my research. Unfortunately parental support and involvement was lacking in urban districts (Kinney, 2010). What is unique about the district I

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work in is that we have a wide range from lower income to higher income families. According to the Future Ready Index PA 68.3% of Pottstown students are economically disadvantaged. I have learned in my district that parents will put the funds aside for extracurricular activities.

I was curious about why my students wanted to continue in the band program and this is a significant factor in retention. My students expressed that having fun and learning to play an instrument is why they want to continue (Appendix A, Column 2). All of them said that they are going to continue to play their instrument in the future. Along with why I wanted to include what they enjoyed most about the band, students mentioned that playing at their concert and showing their families what they could do was something they enjoyed. One in particular said that they enjoyed being around their friends and love making music together. Band teachers want to create a sense of family and that is usually promoted in the environment (Albert, 2006). Giving students that safe haven for them especially in an urban district will let them know that you care. Making band fun for my students is just the tip of the iceberg. As they get older they might not remember every little detail, but I know they will never forget the experiences we created together along with the friendships they have built.

Parent Responses

After students were surveyed I wanted to reach out to parents to see why they wanted their child to be a part of the instrumental program and why they should continue. Because I have been in this district for almost six years I have built a positive rapport with parents and colleagues, which I know helps some aspects of my program.

What I discovered in my research with the parents is one of the main reasons why they enrolled their child in our band program was to improve their child's well being (Appendix B, Column 1). Parents were well aware of the fact that music builds self-esteem, discipline and

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patience. And not only did the parents know this, but the students. Students stated that they felt that they were more responsible, patient, and driven. Band gives students multiple responsibilities, practicing on their own, remembering lesson and rehearsal schedules, proper care for the instrument. Ownership empowers students to take responsibilities in music making and the functional process of an ensemble. (Albert, 2006). Because my parents were very aware of the fact that music builds ownership, I asked what benefits they have seen since signing their child up for an instrument. Many parents expressed that their child has built a sense of responsibility, commitment and confidence.

Stated in my research funding and fees could be a potential problem with recruitment and retention. I was surprised to see a parent mention that they wanted their child to have a foundation in their elementary school years of being introduced to playing an instrument and the Pottstown School District program provided that opportunity without the financial burden (Appendix B, Column 1). Something that my colleagues and I have tried to consider is that many of our parents cannot afford extra expenses. Providing books, reeds and valve oil has cut the cost for many of our families. In the end they are really only paying for the instrument fee, which can get costly. We have also teamed up with our instrument representatives and have lowered the rental fees for specifically our district to allow students to be involved without the financial barrier for their parents. There will always be obstacles in every program, surveying my parents and students helped me understand what they are thinking. Taking this information will help me expand upon my program.

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Conclusion

While certainly there are many challenges instrumental teachers face whether they are in an urban district or not, building a program takes time and patience. Instrumental teachers might have to think more realistically when teaching in a more urban setting. Coming up with creative ideas, and working harder for funding. And children in lower socioeconomic schools deserve the same opportunities as children in higher socioeconomic schools.

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APPENDIX A

Column 1	Column 2	Column 3
Why did you sign up for band?	Why do you want to continue band next year?	What has been your favorite part about band?
Because my dad and 3 uncles played	Because it's fun.	Having my first concert.
Because I wanted to play the drums	Because it is fun and I want to keep doing it	Play the songs and my lessons
I signed up for band because I thought that it would be cool to learn an instrument.	I want to continue band next year so I can play more songs and learn more notes and hopefully be in the parade.	My favorite part about band is when everyone one was playing together for rehearsal
Well i really didn't want to do it until I found out what band really is about and now I love it!	It's fun I get to see my friends.	When I make a mistake then I perfect the mistake I made.
I signed up for band because I always loved music. And Ii just wanted to try something new and now I love to play the tenor saxophone	Because it's fun and it gets you in the mood.	My favorite part about band is playing with Mrs. Mest.

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I signed up for band because a ever since I was in 4th grade I wanted to try something new and if I did not like it I would quit but I ended up loving it so ever since I have stayed and I have loved it	Because I love playing the drums and I think next year I am thinking about upgrading to a snare.	I have just loved learning new things
I signed up because I like music and always wanted to play an instrument.	It's something I like to do	The teacher and just have good music to play
I wanted to learn how to play an instrument	To get better at playing my instrument and because I enjoy band	Concerts
I signed up because I wanted to try something new.	I want to continue because I love playing trumpet.	The concerts because you feel accomplished after.
I want to try something new	Because its fun	Traveling
I signed up for band because I always love music and a lot of my family members played so I wanted to keep the family band line going and my friends wanted me to join!	Because I love music and I love the instrument I play!	Learning from the best band directors and seeing my friends.

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I joined band because I want to be better than my brother at trumpet so I joined to get better then him.	Because I am nowhere near as good as my brother.	That I can spend time with my cousins
I probably wanted to play another instrument other than the piano and guitar.	So I can improve more in my music education.	We play as a whole group, not as just 5th or 6th graders.
I wanted to try something new.	To make my notes sound better	Playing my instrument and having fun
Both my parents were involved in band and encouraged me to play an instrument. I enjoy being involved in activities.		I enjoy being around friends that have the love of making music together.

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APPENDIX B

Column 1	Column 2	Column 3
Why did you decide to enroll your child/children into the band program?	What benefits have you seen since enrolling your child/children into the band program?	Additional Comments
They were interested in playing an instrument.	They have learned to practice more to get better in what they do.	
Because my child wanted to learn to play an instrument and had friends involved in band.	Group participation, being part of a team. Commitment to a group and to practice. Responsibility, caring for an instrument, keeping track of practices and lesson times and days. Making sure to have everything needed for lesson/rehearsal. Having a creative outlet, being involved with the arts. Gained an appreciation for music and musicians.	
I wanted my children to have a foundation in their elementary school years of	Diversified their education and gave them the basis needed to become a musician, in school band and	Access to music education is invaluable, and should be granted to

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being introduced to playing a musical instrument, and the PSD program provided the opportunity without the financial barrier.	beyond, if that is what they choose to pursue. They are not just spectators; they know that making music is within their abilities if they put in the effort.	every school age child.
She requested to quit piano and play flute	Enjoyment listening to her play	
I chose to enroll my child in the band program because I wanted her to have an appreciation for music and a chance to use her creativity. I also believe that playing an instrument improves patience, intelligence, and memory.	I have seen my daughter become more confident, have a better memory, and socialize more.	My husband and I both were members of our school band and loved it. It was fun, created a love of music, and ignited creativity within us. We want that for our daughter as well.
Was rewarding for our other children, so we wanted the same experience for this child	Hard to determine due to Covid restrictions.	
After hearing about the	Working knowledge of music.	

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program, she came home stating that she was joining the band and playing the flute. We recognize the importance that music and activities have on a person's overall wellness and education, so we readily agreed to let her join.	Ability to replicate music she's heard. Increased interest in playing music.	
To improve her music education	Having more music skills and theory	
He loves music and has natural musical talent.	Discipline and more musical enjoyment	I have to say my other son dropped band because he didn't feel confident about it. I think confidence makes a difference in the child staying in band long term.
He really wanted to learn to play the drums like his uncle	He is doing great at the drums and bells and it gives him something to	Love Miss Ficca, she is the best!!!

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and father	do, seems more focused	
Band teaches a child to be responsible, self-discipline and to manage their time accordingly.	My child is self motivated, very disciplined and prepared for all performances.	Band allows both individual creativity and group collaboration in efforts to prepare for performances. Band allows like-minded students to gather in a safe and enriching environment.