



# Cultivating Your Small School Band Program

By Josh King and Michelle King

**S**mall school bands face unique obstacles, from limited resources and sparse instrumentation to a scarcity of dedicated musicians. However, with careful guidance, creative approaches, and a strong sense of community, these limitations can be transformed into catalysts for musical growth and personal development. We have been teaching in small schools for over 30 combined years and have been able to create meaningful opportunities that not only benefit our programs but also the students themselves. The following are some of the elements we have found to be essential in our small-school program success.

## STUDENT LEADERSHIP

The success of band programs is contingent upon delegation of responsibilities. In small school programs, limited staffing often necessitates student power to fill required roles. While there are practical reasons for this, student leadership is also the highest honor you can grant your students. Create a process for choosing your leadership that will show you not only who is a good fit but also who is willing to work toward their goals. It is important to look beyond those students who always stand out, also considering

those who will lead quietly by example. Some of our best lead crew captains and quartermasters have been students who were often hidden behind louder, more confident students. You will find that your students notice those quiet leaders, watching to see what they do. Your student leaders set the tone for the entire year, so make sure you choose wisely. We often have drum majors whose personalities are the yin to the other's yang. A belief that every student can contribute to the success of the whole is what makes our band families great—even our small ones!

## ESTABLISHING GOALS

Goals are a necessity for any successful band program, and how you set them can be a predictor of future success or failure. It's

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one thing to say that you want to earn UIL Sweepstakes awards, but it's something entirely different when you add *how* you plan to accomplish it. Using the SMART goals system can help you create that plan for each goal. At the risk of losing readers who might cringe at the mention of an idea central to T-TESS, there is much we can learn from setting goals that are specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound.

Creating measurable goals helps students and directors assess effectiveness of achievement. Include a debrief session to determine whether a goal was achieved,

assess the positive outcomes and opportunities for improvement, and allow students to contribute. Our students often set a goal of qualifying to an All-State Band. If this doesn't materialize, we make a point of having a student-led discussion where the student builds on the negatives and the positives of the experience. This can be uncomfortable at first, but it benefits both our program and our students' development into contributing adults!

#### COMMUNITY PRESENCE

What small-town communities see and hear during Friday night halftime is often the most influential factor in their accep-

tance and support. Very few of them are allowed to be in *the room where it happens*, so we need to take what we do to them. As the best (and sometimes only) advocates for our programs, we must brave the environment outside our band hall and plan performances in our community. While we might not always believe our ensemble is ready for public performance, it is important that we showcase our students in our efforts to advocate for our programs.

Find many and varied venues where students can perform. Encouraging them to perform for their churches is an excellent way to build their confidence and increase community support for your program. To assist with recruitment, take a drumline or chamber ensemble to the elementary school and play for students as they arrive on campus. The resulting traffic jam will be a positive experience for current and future members of your band family. Think creatively and look for existing community functions where your band or a small group could perform. These performances that aren't under the bright Friday Night Lights can help grow the reputation of your program and expand your community's perception of music education.

#### CURRICULUM RESOURCES

There is no one-size-fits-all music curriculum, especially for small school bands. You must find what works for your students and often adjust existing resources to fit your program's needs. There is so much wonderful material available, but none of it will help your students advance if you don't use it effectively.

We utilize as many resources as we can and build binders for our students. You don't need to distribute an entire method book—doing so can actually be overwhelming to a beginner. While you do need to purchase the full material, you can choose pages that address what you are working on in the now and distribute only those. Depending on your ensemble level or instrumentation, you might need to create your own exercises. Because we know our students and their musical needs better than anyone, this can sometimes be our best option—*the right book for your needs might not exist*.

It should also be noted that each year, you need to remain flexible about curriculum. Young musicians will easily master certain aspects one year and struggle the next.



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Regardless, the same major concepts must be addressed: tone, note identification, and rhythm. This is true for both homogeneous and heterogeneous approaches.

### BUILDING INCENTIVES

This fact has held true for years—*students will do a lot for a sticker*. Utilizing practical incentives is an excellent way to plant seeds of motivation that can become intrinsic. All growth deserves celebration! Individual achievements in the early band years will contribute to greater ensemble successes down the road. Incentives can be both personal and public. Giving “brag tags” for scale or rhythmic passoffs is an excellent way to reward achievement. If budget is an issue, recognize achievements by adding students’ names to a poster or banner you display. The most important thing is that you recognize student progress as often as possible.

### COLLABORATION IS KEY

Small-school success is highly dependent on students who are involved in many activities. For those students to succeed, we must create and maintain open lines of communication. This includes communication not only with the students, but


also their parents, administrators, other sponsors, and the community. Meeting with other program sponsors and coaches prior to the school year will allow you to construct a preliminary conflict calendar. Understand that this isn’t the sole solution, but with this rough blueprint for the year, you’re more likely to avoid issues throughout.

That said, conflict is inevitable, and how we respond to it reflects on our programs. It is important to resolve conflicts between sponsors, keeping in mind that the students’ best interest should always be at the forefront of the conversation. Remaining calm, honest, and willing to compromise are invaluable traits that will not only keep your blood pressure down but will also benefit the students in the long run.

### MENTORS MATTER

If you don’t have a mentor, get one! Even if you’ve been doing this work for years, it’s important to have someone to lean on and to gain advice and perspective from. It must be someone you trust to be honest (and whose honest feedback you will accept). This can be a seasoned band director in your area or someone who worked

as a band director at your school for many years and still happens to live in town. If a predecessor is still in the community, get to know them and include them as much as possible. They will love being included and will sing your praises to anyone who will listen. Invite them to your rehearsals and your beginner classes. Get their feedback on everything they observe. This is one of the best ways to improve your teaching methodology while also gaining a colleague who will always be in your court.

Every small school band across our state is an important part of their school’s educational environment. As we work to cultivate success in our programs, we must remember that there is always room for growth—for our students and for us. Our programs are the heart of what makes Texas bands great, and we should support and celebrate them every day! 



Josh King and Michelle King are the band directors at Beckville ISD, a 2A district in East Texas.

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