

Friends:

I've been very lucky at Taft Middle School to see the numbers grow in the band program over the past 2 years. This year I am approaching 300 students. That includes nearly 100 beginners in 3 classes, intermediate band, symphonic band and jazz band – and one piano class. (We are on an 8 period block schedule.) We've received permission from the district to advertise and hire a second band director at Taft. FYI, we have less than 600 students total at the school. We can all make this happen at our schools. Ron Lipka asked me to share some of the things I've been doing. So . . . Here's what I've been doing.

Advocacy, advocacy, advocacy.

I see three primary constituencies at the school - Students, parents/community, staff/administration. I know we all work hard to take care of our students. That's a given. So, I won't talk about that.

I try hard to reach out to parents and the community. At every opportunity, I send out press releases about concerts, about student awards, etc. You might be surprised how often these get published in the local newspapers. I've invited and on numerous occasions I've had TV press at the school to interview and film students doing various cool things. This keeps parents and community members aware and excited about the program. And, they talk about it to their kids and the kids get excited about joining band. We have "Taft Band Rocks" bumper stickers on cars all over the North Valley. Anything you can do to add "branding" to your program gets more students. A tradition that has developed at Taft is one where I invite parents and alums to play on 2 or 3 selections with the jazz band on the December concert. This has become a huge hit, with parents, grandparents, uncles and aunts, all dusting off the clarinets and trombones that have been in a closet for years, so they can play with us. It doesn't always sound great, but they love it. It draws a really big crowd, and it's a lot of fun. And, maybe just a wee bit extra work. Parents are already abuzz about playing again this coming December.

Faculty and administration: I look for every opportunity to convince the faculty and administration that there is nothing more important to their students than their involvement in arts classes. At least once a month I summarize a new piece of research on the benefits of arts education or more specifically music education, and I stuff it in every teacher's box. (You can find new research with each email message from MENC.) I know that 90 percent of the papers go in the trash, but sooner or later they will take notice and start to read it. We talk about it in the hallway. It's a constant effort on my part. I communicate regularly with the special education teachers to let them know that the student they sent to me who can't read just learned how to read notes on the treble clef. That's a major accomplishment and those teacher need to know it. I invite teachers and administration to come in to my room and visit during their prep periods so that they can see how hard their kids are working in band. And, quite a few will come in and sit for 30 minutes and watch. They enjoy the time there.

I participate in all-important committees at the school that might have any impact on the band program. I sit on the instructional council, and whenever any discussion starts about taking away electives, I am quick to remind them that if they want to increase test scores, they need to increase arts electives. In fact, last year when the school had money to hire an additional math teacher, I convinced them to instead hire an art teacher, and that is what the principal did.

So at this point, any student who wants to get in to band meets no resistance from counselors, administration or other faculty. Every effort is made at the school to provide kids with their wish for band, orchestra, art - and this year, drama. We are starting to get a pretty strong arts focus at Taft.

Lastly, I stay in touch with the elementary school music teachers that feed in to Taft. I try to visit, and when possible, take the jazz band to play for their students. I always send them information on concert schedules and invite them and their students to concerts.

I'm just constantly reaching out to others around me in the school and community and making myself as visible as possible. If someone needs a musical question answered, I'm there. If the principal needs music backup for something, I provide it. The payback has been a huge increase in music students.

Feel free to contact me if you have any questions. Onward.

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