

teaching

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music

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Your Performers**

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MUSIC EDUCATOR
AS ADVOCATE**

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ALTERNATIVE ENSEMBLES

*Today's nontraditional performing groups
encourage even more students to join in!*



National Association
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WE ARE FAMILY

BY CATHY APPLEFIELD OLSON

Creating and Sustaining Bonds in Performing Ensembles



GROUP DYNAMICS can be tricky in any situation. For performing ensembles, music educators can enlist a variety of techniques to help ensure that students are harmonizing on all levels. Most agree that when it comes to team building among students who hail from different backgrounds, grades, and temperaments, it's best to create a familial atmosphere early in the school year and lead by example.

"A big part of the way I design my classes, whether at the elementary level or even college kids, is about having to talk to each other in a way that brings in everybody's perspective," says 2016 NAFME In-Service Conference presenter Manju Durairaj, an adjunct professor of music curriculum at

VanderCook College of Music in Chicago, Illinois, and a music teacher in grades PreK–4 at Chicago's Latin School. "You have to set that up as teacher early on, or you're bound for failure."

For David Holdhusen, chairman of the music department and director of choral activities at the University of South Dakota in Vermillion, "The most important thing I do with the ensembles I've worked with at the university level, as well as in public schools, is to have some sort of retreat at the beginning of the year." Early timing is key, says this 2016 In-Service Conference presenter, "before they really get to know each other, to strip down those



“They need to get comfortable with each other before the music can become important.”

—DAVID HOLDHUSEN

sense of unity. My motto is: ‘One band, one sound, one family.’ It’s how I’ve come to teach. The goal is to create a superior sound together while also treating each member of the group with respect.”

Richard Cangro, associate professor of music education

at Western Illinois University in Macomb, and also a NAFME In-Service Conference presenter, says that a cohesive unit starts with the teacher. “Most important, the behavior needs to be modeled,” he says. “Everything starts with the teacher/director. It starts with the teacher being interested in students’ lives and opinions. Gone are the days where the teacher does all of the thinking during pin-drop rehearsals. Effective learning occurs when the students are encouraged to be thoughtfully engaged and enabled to communicate with each other as well as the class and teacher. Every voice matters.”

preconceived ideas they may have coming in.”

Wendy Moy, assistant professor of music and director of choral activities and music education at Connecticut College in New London, and a NAFME In-Service Conference presenter, is also a fan of retreats. And, she’s quick to point out, they don’t have to be as elaborate as some teachers may think. “They can be done simply, and they don’t have to be overnight,” she says. “Ideally you’d get off campus, but I’ve also done a retreat in the cafeteria during off-hours. We do group-building activities—things that let them get to know each other as people.”

Think Outside the Music Box

In fact, it’s the people, not the performance, that can really bond a group. During Holdhusen’s retreats, activities range from students tossing a ball of yarn around a circle and revealing something about themselves, or answering questions such as whether they like the movie or book version of a story better. “These are questions that get people out of their shell, things that have nothing to do with music,” he says. “They need to get comfortable with each other before the music can become important.”

Holdhusen’s 40-student college ensemble also holds a football game where it’s sopranos and tenors vs. basses and altos, a Halloween costume party, and a holiday party at the end of the semester. “One of the most important things I do with them is create that family atmosphere,” he says.

“My big word is ‘unity,’” says 2016 In-Service Conference presenter Lori Schwartz Reichl, a band director currently on leave from the Howard County Public School System in Maryland; beginning in October 2016 she will have a series published in the teacher’s edition of *In Tune Monthly*. “Everything you do within your ensemble must be about creating a

The Young and the Introverted

Since many ensembles are grouped according to ability and not age, teachers should be proactive in integrating younger students with their older counterparts, as well as those who may be shy about participating.

Schwartz Reichl ran a summer band camp for students ranging from rising seventh- to 12th-graders. “Some of the high school kids were looking at some of the younger kids and thinking, ‘What the heck,’ but from the moment we begin I let them know that it by no means has to do with how old we are: It has to do with what benefits the whole sound,” she says. “Of course, we have to be really careful about a sixth-grader who might not be speaking the same language as an eighth-grader, and may not have the same confidence, or even know a single person in the band.”

Moy has found success in pairing younger kids with a “choir buddy.” “It’s wonderful to match up a newer person coming into an ensemble with someone who’s established who can show them the nature of the ensemble and the nuts and bolts,” she says. “A choral buddy goes a long way—and they don’t have to be best friends.”

Teachers can create situations that level the playing field for all members of an ensemble, says Moy. “If you’re going to

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have discussion in rehearsal about, say, what we think a piece means, instead of just opening it up to the whole class to raise hands—which favors the extroverted kids—hand out a 3x5 card and ask them to put down their thoughts and then lead the discussion based on the cards,” she suggests.

Cangro advocates cooperative learning strategies where kids are encouraged to respond to each other, and all are held accountable for their work. To achieve the goal, he engages students in a variety of activities, including Think-Pair-Share, where students individually think about a solution for a posed question or problem and then, in pairs, compare answers and elaborate on their ideas, and Rally Robin, where students alternate generating oral responses to a posed question.

“The biggest problem I hear about from teachers is time,” Cangro says. “I suggest you do need to time these activities or they will eat up your whole rehearsal. Set an activity at two minutes, which is longer than you may think, and it can be a give-and-take with the teacher facilitating the conversation.”

Bullies and Cliques Be Gone

Acknowledge that bullying is “always going to happen, especially with younger kids,” says Durairaj. “Ideally, it’s good to have all these conversations way before something happens, reminding them of the rules of working together.”

Role-playing can be effective, Durairaj says, as is bringing in positive lessons from literature. A favorite of hers is the Jacqueline Woodson’s book *Each Kindness*. “I read it, then we talk about it. What constitutes bullying? What are the trigger images and words, or trigger situations? If kids don’t know what constitutes bullying, how are we going to prevent it? It’s about setting up classroom structures in such a way that everybody is worthy of respect.”

“Cliques tend to happen when there is a division of interest in the group,” says Schwartz Reichl. “But I’ve found if

I’m teaching unity throughout, demonstrating kindness and making it about the music, then ultimately you won’t have that sense of division.”

Nonverbal techniques are also effective, notes Schwartz Reichl. “When the teacher is talking too much without allowing the music to come through, the students may begin talking among themselves. The more you talk, the less they listen.” When her students enter the room, for example, she calls the group to attention and elicits posture checks by

gently stomping her feet. “They know: feet flat on the floor, in posture position,” she says.

For Moy, sometimes the answer is as easy as shifting the shape of the room. “If I saw something happening that was negative, I would quickly have everyone get up and switch seats,” she says. “Because if I’m noticing it, chances are other students are noticing, too.”



TEACHING STUDENTS HOW TO LEAD AND HOW TO FOLLOW

Many music ensembles place students in leadership roles. How can teachers foster interpersonal relations and leadership qualities while also promoting fairness, individual creativity, and a sense of belonging?

Holdhusen selects four to eight section leaders, while his students elect a handful of officers, with whom he tries to meet every other week. “We talk about ways they can lead the group,” he says. While things usually flow smoothly, “sometimes these leaders will think their position comes with more power than it probably should—a hard dynamic.” To help diffuse potential issues, he likes to have leadership understudies waiting in the wings. “That’s another checkpoint: a way for others in the ensemble to come back to me if they need to and say, ‘This is out of hand.’”

Schwartz Reichl assigns section leaders, who are typically the ones who are the most musically advanced but can also demonstrate commitment. “Sometimes the most advanced player might be the one who doesn’t always come to class prepared,” she deadpans. But her leadership ends there. “I don’t do much else with other roles. I have found over the years that if I name a president of the band or something like that, then the pompous confidence comes through—and that’s not what I want to happen.”

Durairaj says it’s all about “bringing the focus into what we are doing as an ensemble, and creating group empathy. We are working toward a common project where the end result is immediately evident—and to do this we all have to work together.”

Hitting a High Note

In the end, when it comes to performing groups, the bond comes back around to the music, educators say. Holdhusen’s off-site retreats conclude with all members of the ensemble setting and stating their musical goals. “It’s the music that’s the uniting factor. That’s the team part of it,” he says. “At an athletic event, the team comes together to learn the plays to win the game. Here, we come together so we can portray the artistry the composer has given us. It’s really about building a safe environment where students can emote the music in the space.”

“We are all there for the common love of music,” Moy says. “It’s good to have a discussion with the whole choir: ‘What are our goals?’ The teacher’s job is to lead—where we should be going, what type of ensemble we want to have, what kind of community environment will get us to where we want to go artistically.”

“Music teachers are in such a unique place where we see the kids through multiple years, and sometimes we are the only safe place for them,” says Durairaj. ■