

Program Sustainability – A School Administrator Perspective

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This edition of *Wisconsin School Musician* on sustainability is intriguing. It provides the opportunity to hear from successful music teachers how they have been able to build and sustain programs during a time of increased scrutiny of all programs due to increasingly limited resources.

As a former high school music teacher and as a school administrator, I can relate to the challenges of all *elective* curricular and co-curricular programs. There is greater scrutiny, accountability and competition in our schools than I have ever seen in my 41+ years as an educator.

In my limited space, I will first share my personal experience of establishing and sustaining a high school choral program. I will include techniques shared by others who are successful in maintaining their programs. Finally, I will provide a few tips from the administrator perspective on how I believe we need to work together in partnership with our music programs, our school and district leadership and school boards.

When I began my teaching career, I was blessed to inherit a quality high school choral program. Although there was a transition of one year between the choral director icon who built the program and when I started, he left a quality choral program with well prepared, excited and talented high school vocalists. My challenge was to continue providing the quality instruction these students had grown to know, appreciate and expect. I was fortunate to have excellent college preparation and training including working with two outstanding choral directors during my observation and participation and student teaching days.

In my first three years, we expanded our choral program to include an all girl's choral, a swing choir and madrigal singers.

I left for two years to take on another position with a non-profit organization but was torn by my choice and had the opportunity to return to the district I first served. During my two-year hiatus, the replacement director took the program with over 120 singers down to 40 students. Needless to say, I had a challenge to re-build the program to where it was when I left.

Working closely with my fellow band director, the school administration, coaches and parents to help recruit and build the program, I was able to bring the program back to its original size and quality in two years. We expanded the program with greater participation especially in our show choir, small ensemble, solo competitions and more.

Among comments of today's music teachers to sustain their programs, one teacher wrote, "...I have recently started incorporating contemporary a cappella and it's catching on like fire. Everyone wants to be a part of it, but the catch is you have to be in one of my concert choirs for at least a year to even audition."

Another teacher wrote, "...the biggest thing a director can do to sustain their program is to create relationships that can function as allies. Being visible in the community, having a strong parent group and having trusted resource people are key."

Finally, another director wrote, "...many times in small schools we are sharing students with athletics, forensics, year-book clubs, etc. Instead of competing against these other programs, I believe in "supporting" each other. Many times I talk with coaches about which pep band dates are important so we can show support. As educators, if we chose to use the "attack mode" and use put downs toward programs, we tend to divide our students.

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The students feels forced to have to pick and choose what is better for them, which might not be the music program."

As school district administrators, we are forced to make difficult decisions each year as we develop our budgets. When we see any program that is losing students, that the quality of the program that is being provided is "fair" at best, the program becomes less painful to downsize and in some cases, eliminate.

I was in a district where we were forced to downsize a program due to insufficient numbers to sustain a fulltime director. In this situation, the issue was the loss of a longtime director that was well loved. Many students lost interest after she left. The new person could not sustain the numbers because his style was different than his predecessor.

wsma board perspective

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In two other instances, the directors were simply not providing the quality of music instruction the students deserved. In both cases, I was able to encourage the directors to take early retirements. The alternative would have been to terminate them due to poor performance.

Music programs in our schools must exhibit certain qualities, some of which are described by fellow music teachers above. This requires highly trained, skilled music educators who, first and foremost, love children and their profession. You need to be a PR person, one who is willing to work in partnership with your fellow teachers, be visible in the community bringing your music groups to various community groups, develop and maintain a strong parent group and more.

Quality music programs that are the pride of the school, district and community and that people continually talk and brag about are what we should all strive to achieve. When you have these programs, your efforts to sustain them into the future will be the continuation of what you are already doing. It takes a tremendous amount of hard work, continuous sacrifice, a few sleepless nights and a few tears perhaps, but in the end you know it was worth your efforts. If your program is on the cusp of possibly being downsized and/or eliminated, as a director you need to first look at yourself to find out what you need to do differently if you hope to build the program to the level you want and expect.

Failure to do so will ultimately mean the school administrator having to make the tough decision as I previously described.

There are fellow musicians and others who are here to assist all music teachers to reach that pinnacle of quality music programs that exists in the majority of our schools and districts throughout the state.

If you don't know whom to turn to for assistance and support, there are numerous resources, many of which can be found through *Wisconsin School Musician*.

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