



Honor Groups: Easier than You Think!

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Please note that even though this article is written from a band perspective, these ideas are easily adaptable to orchestra and choir disciplines.

A few years ago, we met as junior high band directors and tossed around the idea of starting an honor band for our students. We all thought it was a good idea but were hesitant to add one more thing to our already much too full plates. Finally, with much persuasion, Curtis Winters talked us into moving forward with the idea and volunteered to administer the event.

The Schedule and Date:

The first thing we needed was a date. We decided to hold our honor band over a two day period – Friday and Saturday. Our plan included rehearsing all day Friday, returning Saturday morning for some section rehearsals, rehearsing the full-band, including a concert run-through, and then taking a short break before the afternoon concert (*see illustration*). We chose a date in January before the festival season frenzy started in earnest. This worked well, and we liked the brief rehearsal period. The other advantage to this, two-day format is that it gives parents and students a chance to see what can be accomplished in a short amount of time. Students like the sense of urgency, and their parents are impressed with how quickly they can learn three or four selections (that actually ended up sounding quite good.) We also shared busses with one bus transporting students from three different schools, thus minimizing that expense.

The Guest Clinician and Director:

The next thing we needed to decide was who would conduct the group, deciding to engage a guest conductor instead of doing it ourselves. This cost more but had the following benefits:

- There was less pressure on individual teachers, allowing us to take care of administrative tasks, deal with details and assist the guest conductor, as needed.
- Students received instruction from someone with a different point of view. Local teachers were also validated as students heard the conductor mention the same concepts that they have heard in their own schools on a daily basis.
- Professional Development: Students were not

the only ones who learned from this experience. Teachers benefited, as well. We came away with new tools to add to our “teaching toolbox” which has subsequently benefited all of our students in multiple ways.

- Collaboration: While the honor band rehearsed, teachers had many opportunities to collaborate with each other informally. Sometimes we discussed a new technique we saw the guest conductor use or asked a colleague a particular question to help with our teaching later on.
- Literature: Guest conductors introduce new literature that we may not have had the chance to explore. One year, we had a guest conductor who was also a composer. It was fun for the students to perform an original composition and get insights from the composer himself.

The first year we did this, our guest conductor suggested that we conduct it ourselves in the future. This could certainly be done, especially if budget is an issue. You could have one director do the whole thing or split it up with three or four directors who are each responsible for a piece. When I was in Washington County, we rotated it among the high school directors. The High School Honor Band was conducted by the director of the local university. This worked well and was also a great experience for all involved.



Repertoire:

Next is deciding what to perform. Remember that you want to be careful here (you only have a couple of days), so program accordingly. We decided to program pieces that were 1/2 to 1 grade lower than what we would normally do. Another option is to pick one challenging piece, a medium piece and an easy piece. This keeps everyone happy and will give you more time for the challenging music and still have a chance to sound good at the concert. We usually give guidelines to our guest conductor regarding the level of music we typically play. They would then make suggestions, and we would make sure it was something we thought would work for our students. Other times, the guest conductor left it entirely up to us. In that case, we collaborated, made suggestions and came up with a program ourselves.

After you decide what music to play, it needs to be procured. The cheap way to do this is to use music that is already in the music libraries of schools in your district. If you decide to play something different, it will obviously need to be purchased. This year, we decided that we would buy two sets of every selection. After the concert, the music was distributed among the band directors. This is a great way to add good quality music to your library.

Once the music is selected, it is a good idea to give it to the students as soon as possible. We did that this past year and it made a big difference in how well our students were prepared. Instead of requiring our guest conductor to hammer out notes and rhythms, he was able to spend time making music. That is where the real magic of this event happens and what the students remember.

Selecting Students:

One of the hardest things to do is deciding which students should be selected to participate. There is a hard way and an easy way to do this. Each has its strong points.

The hard way is to audition each student. This takes an enormous amount of time. The good thing about it is that you get a true honor band that is the cream of the crop. You also might end up with several students from one school and hardly any or none from others.

We decided to choose the easy way. We allotted each participating school a certain number of students to nominate based upon the percentage of students in their program. The honor band administrator would then take those nominations and fill out the instrumentation of the group, making sure it was fairly balanced. If not, he would ask for more nominations for certain parts. This was quick, easy and fair.

Benefits:

So, why should you consider holding an honor band or any kind of honor group? Here is what students think:

- They enjoy making music with others who are serious about it. In their classes at school, some of their peers do not care as much as they do. Here, they are surrounded by others with the same desire to make great music.
- They enjoy meeting students from other schools and building new friendships. They realize that students at other schools are just like them, and music gives them

common ground. School rivalries are put to the side as they work together—especially when they notice that their directors are already friends and have no animosity towards each other.

All of a sudden, they realize that even though they may be the best player on their instrument at their school, there are several others who are just as good if not better at other schools.

- It is a challenge. Lots of times, advanced students are bored waiting for the rest of the class to catch up. Here, they are challenged to see

how fast and how well they can learn their parts, come together as a team and perform a memorable concert.

- It is an eye opening and humbling experience. All of a sudden, they realize that even though they may be the best player on their instrument at their school, there are several others who are just as good if not better at other schools. They find out quickly that they still have a lot they can improve upon.

Conclusion:

I remember when I was in a junior high honor band. It was an amazing musical experience that is memorable to this day. I recall coming together with strangers and working towards a common goal. There were long, difficult rehearsals, and we were tired by the end. But it was all worth it. We loved that experience and it continues to be a highlight of my life to this day. It does not take much to make an impact like this on our students. I am glad my directors did this for me. I am glad we are able to do it for our students now and hope many of you will do it for your students in the future. *It is well worth it!*

2014 Junior High/Middle School Band Festival

Congratulations to the following bands that have been selected to perform in the 2014 UMEA Junior High/Middle School Band Invitational March 13-15 at Libby Gardner Hall on the University of Utah campus.

American Fork Jr. High Wind Ensemble
American Fork Jr. High Symphonic Band
Centennial Jr. High Advanced Band
Centennial Middle School Wind Symphony
Central Davis Junior High
Copper Mountain Middle School Symphonic Band
Ephraim Middle School Symphonic Band
Fairfield Junior High Symphonic Band
Farmington Junior High Concert Band
Farmington Junior High Symphonic Band
Kaysville Jr. High Advanced Band
Kaysville Jr. High Intermediate Band
Legacy Jr. High Symphonic Band
Mapleton Junior HS Symphonic Band
Millcreek Jr. High Symphonic Band
Mountain Ridge Jr. High Symphonic Band
North Davis Junior High Symphonic Band
North Layton Junior High Advanced Band
Pleasant Grove Junior High Symphonic Band
Syracuse Junior High School
Timberline Middle School Symphonic Band
Venture Academy
Vista Heights Middle School Wind Orchestra
Willowcreek Middle School Wind Symphony