
Making Your Retreat a Success

Here are ideas that can be inserted appropriately into the planning or implementation stages of a good retreat. Feel free to pick and choose (and add a few of your own) to develop and run a successful retreat.

Retreats can be as diverse as the teachers and students involved. While the article by Lesley Moffat gives a great overview on managing a music retreat, just like in music, the theme can have many variations. *Voice* sent a request to several music educators who have done retreats asking them to share something that makes their retreats successful...something you do at your retreats that works well—perhaps an activity, a helpful hint (or two) that can help ensure success or a consideration that is vital when planning or managing your retreat—or anything else you feel would be good to include, especially something a younger teacher might not think of. This article contains some of the responses. They are ideas that can be inserted appropriately into the planning or implementation stages of a good retreat. Feel free to pick and choose (and add a few of your own) to develop and run a successful retreat.

Ben Brueggemeier – Ferris High School

The Ferris Band program has two retreats each year—both in January.

The first weekend is our jazz retreat and jazz artist-in-residence weekend. My jazz groups go to a regional camp for the weekend, and we have guest artists come up and work with the students in master classes, workshops, sectionals and big band rehearsals. I try to hire jazz instructors from one school or organization when possible. One year I will hire the clinicians from Whitworth, the next from EWU or I will get guys from the Spokane Jazz Orchestra, etc. The clinicians are with us for two days; they run sectionals, give instrument master classes and workshops, as well as facilitate a jam session each night. A highlight every year is when the clinicians sit in with the band and play along in the big band rehearsals. This turns into a playing clinic—each person adding thoughts and ideas as we go. Not only are the clinicians teaching, but by performing with the group, they are modeling best-practice concepts for each instrument. The students spend three

days having a GREAT time working on jazz, building relationships and team concepts, and having the time of their lives!

The second weekend is our annual percussion retreat. We head off campus for a long weekend of percussion ensemble work. We work on ensemble concepts, ensemble technique and performance nuance. I have time with the group to work on so many of the details needed, and we are not required to set up and take down after each rehearsal. We also have time built into the schedule where the students can work on and get help with the small ensemble and solo work they are doing. I have local percussion instructors join us from year to year to critique and rehearse the large ensemble as well as spend time with individuals to work on technique and percussion concepts. In addition to great music, a number of traditions have grown from the percussion retreat—for example, the annual Nerf War is of the utmost importance. With the focus on ensemble and trust within the group, spending three days together really solidifies the interpersonal relationships needed to play

music at a high level.

Both retreats have proven to be extremely valuable to the ensemble success, but more importantly they have given the students a chance to get away, hang out together and completely focus on jazz or percussion.

Ted Christensen and Jim Rice – Inglemoor High School

We have found that retreats are a necessary part of our program. Most every year we organize a three-day, two-night retreat for our Wind Ensemble and Orchestra students. We have been fortunate to have CWU and WWU host our groups. We also feel that taking both groups, together, builds a sense of “department” and creates positive relationships between the band and string students.

Some of the retreat time is spent rehearsing in large ensembles. However, in addition to large group rehearsal, we also use the time for sectionals and small ensemble practice.

As far as tips for success are concerned, we feel it is highly important that the kids know how to work successfully on their own. Since our retreat is roughly two months before our regional solo and ensemble contest, much of the student time is spent working independently. So, for us, it is imperative that a culture of being able to accomplish musical goals, without adult supervision, is paramount. Also, there is very little “down-time.” This tends to make the hotel experience much easier since they are basically “dead” at curfew.

We spend a lot of time (before we leave) trying to develop student maturity for independent, small-group success.

Tom Cox and Vicki White Milton – Mercer Island High School

The Mercer Island Music Department Senior Leadership Retreats have been in existence for decades. The seniors of the whole department used to go overnight together. In more recent years the groups have separated, because of marching, into a Band Retreat and a Choir/Orchestra Retreat. Some years it is overnight and sometimes just a day event. Whatever form it takes solidifies the expectations of the teachers and seniors for the coming year. Although it does not include the playing of instruments, one could certainly include that aspect. Planned in the spring, this event kicks off every school year for the MI department.

- Our retreat does *not* include playing music. It is specifically designed to foster a mentality of leadership for incoming seniors.
- The date needs to be set six months in advance and a venue selected and secured.
- School paperwork (P.O. numbers, travel forms, etc.) must be done before summer.
- Transportation needs to be arranged and secured also before summer. We usually use our district buses, but have at times needed to use a charter bus company depending on district bus availability. It is an expense to consider.
- We always try to include a “Keynote” speaker. It’s an important part of the day’s events, and gives the students someone else to learn from and focus on, besides the teachers.
- We typically do some “icebreaker” activities at the start

and episodically throughout the session.

- We must decide who will do which leadership activities, and then we decide which activities we will include.
- Some activities: Discussions of leadership and various demonstrations relating good leadership qualities and skills
 - We have figured out, from student input, that they want to be involved as much as possible. As a result, we have learned to avoid too much “sit and git” and use kid-included and driven activities.
 - We have had held our retreat at Camp Burton on Vashon Island for most of the 30+ years that we have had one. It’s a great facility, fairly priced, and a nice close, but far enough away destination.

Nancy Duck Jefferson – Kamiak High School

There is nothing better than a carefully planned choir retreat for building that all-important choral community. I am consistently amazed at how much is accomplished in a mere 24 hours away from school. At Kamiak, we have many traditions and activities we do at our fall choir retreat that have developed over time, but there are a select few that are ranked highly by the students as the most meaningful.

1. **The name game:** Although it seems like just a filler activity, the students have cited the name game as an important first step for a successful retreat. The concept is simple. Everyone stands in a big circle. One person combines saying his or her name with a corresponding gesture or movement. Immediately afterward, the whole group imitates that person trying to use the exact same voice, inflection and movement. We encourage the students to try to make it memorable. Everyone gets his 10 seconds of fame, and we get to learn the names of people we don’t know yet. The students find this activity hilarious.
2. **Sectional Cheers and Group Skits:** Each section gets 20-30 minutes to go off and plan a sectional cheer. Creativity is encouraged. After dinner, we all present our cheers and the chaperones vote on the best one. This has become a highly coveted honor and it really gets the section to bond, and you get some highly humorous YouTube videos out of it. In addition to the sectional cheers, we mix the students up into teams, give them 3-5 random unrelated props and tell them to come up with a skit that has a beginning, middle and end that incorporates the props in an integral way. Skits are performed after dinner, and again the chaperones serve as judges. There are bonus points awarded for incorporating choir jokes into the skit.
3. **Campfire/Goal Setting:** This one is fairly self-explanatory, but the students insist that a campfire is a mandatory element. The students sit around the fire, we start by singing something together (it could be a round or something else they all know). Each student gets to say aloud either a personal goal or goal for the choir. It’s amazing how vulnerable the students will allow themselves to get in the dark around a fire.
4. **Put-up Chair and Web of Affirmation:** These two activities are related but different enough that we always do both. In put-up chair, a chair is placed in front. Any student can go sit

in the chair and “put-up” anyone else in the choir. This means they say something positive about another person or thank them for something. This can go on forever if you let it. In Web of Affirmation a big ball of yarn is tossed from student to student. When you pass it to someone, you “affirm” them in some way (say something nice). At the end, it forms a crisscrossed web and we ask the group, “How is our choir like this web?” The metaphors will flow.

Kevin Hartse – Shadle Park High School

We have changed our format from any overnight, out-of-the-area camp to two local day camps. The percussion meet four days the first week, from 10 a.m. until 2 p.m., to work on basics of drumline and music for the fall show. I have a percussion specialist come in to work the camp. On years with a little more available money, I will also bring in a person to rehearse the pit percussion.

Week two, the percussion continue to work and the winds come in for four days, from 9:00 in the morning until 2:00 in the afternoon. Because we are no longer a competitive marching band; this shorter format still allows for setting up protocols for the fall and getting kids fired up for band. We do exercises for team building, and we spend at least two hours each day on marching basics and two hours on music production.

One of the traditions we have at Shadle Park is the assignment of “band buddies” for all incoming ninth graders or any people new to the program. Juniors and seniors in each section take it upon themselves to encourage freshmen to be a part of our program. We have introductions (by the upperclassmen) and make sure the new students are familiar with our program and feel comfortable with the school. During the first week of the new school year, the upperclassmen are the go-to people for any questions the new students have, like where classrooms are located, how to do lunch, deal with office issues, etc. It is a great transition time and really helps connect the students within the program.

Although we no longer compete with marching band, we do assign and wear uniforms, march appropriate style and take pride in performing each halftime show. Our minicamp still works to kick off the year and gets all of us on track for success.

Jeff Hornstein – Meadowdale High School

Choir retreat at Meadowdale High school is an important part of our year. Unlike many choral programs, we go on our retreat in January at our semester break, as opposed to early in the year.

While I see the advantages to going on a retreat in the fall, I have found that we can make more music progress slightly later in the year, as I have a better sense of my students and their needs, and they know more music for us to really work on. Also, having the retreat pretty close to the class forecasting period for the following school year has helped with student retention. At the retreat, I do my best to balance our musical activities (rehearsals) with non-musical activities (team-building). Sometimes I will bring in guest conductors, but other times I look forward to just having the extended time with my group and no clinician.

Max Karler – Bremerton High School

I do multiple retreats throughout the year with various ensembles and groups of students. Below is a list of questions that is helpful when planning an event:

Why do I need this retreat and what is the outcome?

Students are no different than teachers when it comes to extra meetings. They need to know that there is a clear purpose, outcome and positive impact on the music program.

What is the exact plan of the event?

Students and parents need a clear agenda of times in addition to the expected outcome. It’s difficult for parents to support the educational process when they don’t know what is going on during the event.

Have I provided enough notice?

Students and parents, like teachers, are busy people. Longer and more complex events require more notice for parents and students.

Ryan Lane and Parker Bixby – Mercer Island High School

At Mercer Island High School, the primary purpose for our senior leadership retreat, which is held in August, is to shift the mindsets of our seniors from that of participants to a group of leaders who accept direct responsibility for the success of the program. It is a chance for the seniors to bond, plan, set goals, evaluate past practice, express concerns, recognize strengths and to return to school with a vision for the year so compelling that it is impossible for other people to not follow.

How effective the retreat is shows in the following comments from current MIHS seniors:

- “The senior leadership retreat was valuable because it isolated us leaders so we could work together to prepare for the coming year. The experience allowed us to realize our role as leaders and accept the fact that we have an important job in the band to actively support our peers and exemplify what our program stands for.” -Teddy Larkin
- “Before the senior leadership retreat, our class felt a bit disconnected. We hadn’t all been in one band since freshman year, but after we spent that weekend together, I think we were able to reconnect and center around goals for the group. We learned what being a leader and role model really meant. Without the retreat I don’t think our group could’ve had the incredible experiences and performances that we did during marching band season.” -Allie Casper
- “Senior leadership retreat allowed our class to take a step back and reflect on the band program through a new perspective. The retreat catalyzed an important change for our class. Through the retreat we were able to shift from being enthusiastic participants to thoughtful and visionary leaders. By taking the time to get to know our own personal styles of leadership through guest speakers and group conversations, our senior retreat was able to give us the opportunity to align our values and ideas to improve the program. This approach was highly effective for many of us and strengthened our sense of

community. With time to align as a team before the intensity of a school year, our senior class came out of the retreat with a strong set of goals for the band as well as individually. These goals have powered rehearsals and performances with passion and intensity throughout the entire year.” -Zoë Lewis

- “Not only did the leadership retreat allow us as a class to grow as leaders and representatives of Mercer Island, but it strengthened already existing bonds within our program. Though the size of our program allows for more opportunities, often we get lost in the crowd. Spending time together in smaller groups allowed us to regain familiarity with each other and increased the cohesion of the group. Was a ton of fun!” -Dylan Lesko

- “The senior leadership allowed us to think with a new perspective about our role in the band and how we can impact the younger classes. We did a lot of reflecting on how the section leaders and senior leaders in the past had influenced us, both positively and negatively, and that allowed us to realize the magnitude of our impact on the people around us. Another huge part of the retreat was hearing from the keynote speaker because that gave us a new angle through which we can view our impact. After being with our band directors for the previous three years, it was refreshing to hear a new voice emphasizing similar and new ideas, and that helped reinforce many of the important ideas that go with being an effective leader.” -Derek Sims

Megan Lizama – Mount Vernon High School

In our concert choir, an emphasis is placed on student leadership, accountability and ownership. Because of this, our annual August retreat tends to focus on facilitating the development of these skills. Some ways that we do this are:

Bonding Games: These are planned and led by our section leaders and happen two-three times during the retreat. Students learn to work together and let go of inhibitions.

“Thumbs Up”: Singers get five “thumbs up” cards when they arrive and are asked to write messages on them to peers who do something well, make progress, are helpful to others, etc. These are left in “mailboxes” that hang outside their sleeping quarters and are decorated by section leaders before the retreat.

Sectionals: These are student led and provide an opportunity for kids to work out problems on their own. I do not “pluck parts” for my singers, so they appreciate the chance to work through problem spots outside of rehearsal.

Fun Stuff: We take hikes, go to the beach, sing in interesting spots and do a talent show. The students build memories that strengthen their bond.

Chores: Teams of students are responsible for doing everything from preparing meals to cleaning toilets!

“Love Fest”: This is a chance for kids to recognize others for all of the great contributions they make to the ensemble. We do ours around a campfire.

Tim Siess – Union High School

It was the president of our newly formed Union High Orchestra Boosters (unionorchestra.org) who first floated the idea of holding a retreat for the two orchestras. Honestly, my first thought was, “Ugh!” While I think retreats can be valuable, I don’t think I am the person to run them. Fortunately, our president has a relative who came with a Ph.D. in Education, high school ASB experience and lots of practice in running retreats.

It turned out to be a great day for the kids. Our “clinician” had lots of short, active and interactive games that were both fun and decidedly non-threatening to even the shyest of the kids. Several of the games had an “individual responsibility to the team” message built into them – perfect for an ensemble!

My responsibility for the day? Have fun — play games and get to know the freshmen, sit back and enjoy watching different kids take on leadership roles in the games, see quiet kids come out of their shells and laugh as kids display humor and talents that you never see in the regular classroom. It was a great day for me, too, and one that we will probably repeat next year.

Mark Tietjen – University High School

Several years ago, our marching band incorporated four-day retreats into our fall schedule. We are fortunate enough to be able to relocate the band to the Chewelah Peaks Learning Center, and the experience has become the focal point of the fall program and the model for smaller mini-retreats throughout the year.

- Have a desired outcome—in daily AM and PM sectionals blocks and in full-band rehearsal. Activities are easily coordinated to build on each other, providing a more sequential rehearsal. In addition, CPLC provides us with leadership classes for each student/section.
- Real, focused, dedicated, uninterrupted hard work—large blocks of time allow detailed and introspective rehearsals where all aspects of the show can be scrutinized.
- Fun—Challenge/rope course incorporated into the leadership training, movies on a makeshift screen midfield, competitions between sections, nightly campfires.

You may find the following helpful for reference—Oda Grodsky/Jeremy Phillips: *The Why, When, and How of Successful Retreats*, an excellent and succinct guide to developing a retreat for your program.

<http://www.awsplearningcenters.org/chewelahpeak/>

http://www.just-works.com/img/Retreats_Ora_Grodsky_and_Jeremy_Phillips.pdf

