

Kick the Winter Blues

By Deborah Perkins

Music students learn more than music – they learn of life and self-worth. You are a valuable person in the lives of your students. “don’t under-estimate the importance of your work of the responsibility that your job demands: enjoy it”

Second semester can often bring on a slump in activities of students in the school orchestra. Second semester is also the time when students are deciding whether or not to continue with their orchestra class. Many of the goal-directed activities listed below are already in existence in most school orchestra programs, but I am suggesting that we can do more with the preparation and hype to get more from them both musically and psychologically. The students learn but also bond as a social group, which is important for retention. Each activity needs to be built up in advance so that the planning is as fun as the event. All activities need the addition of refreshments to round out the bonding experience for the students.

Solo and Ensemble Festivals

Solo and Ensemble Festivals exist in most school music programs. Some ideas that have worked to assist in preparation and also serve as fun activities are listed below. All serve as an exciting change of pace designed to raise productivity and pride for the orchestra class. Always serve refreshments. In schools that discourage eating in the classroom, teach a lesson on reception etiquette and manners and get permission from the administration in advance.

In-Class Recitals

Rearrange the room to look like a recital hall, changing the lighting, add a video cam, invite parents, and invite other classes such as band, choir, general music, art classes, or office staff. With some planning, the class can travel to the feeder elementary school and perform for a music class there.

In-Class Competitions

Have the students make medals and vote for a winner, (make sure every student receives an award), have students critique their own performances, serve refreshments.

Evening Recitals

Perform in the cafeteria (the change of room will add to the excitement and importance of the experience). Serve refreshments, perform at a local church, or perform at a retirement home.

Orientation Party

January is a good month to hold an orientation/party/meeting for students who are about to graduate or rise to another school (elementary to middle or middle to high; modify it to meet your school district setup.) This event should be held at the school that the students are going to attend. Plan a short rehearsal using fun and easy music, seat the students older with younger, plan skits (students love to mimic the teachers and themselves), play get-acquainted games, serve pizza and dessert. Have students wear their orchestra shirts, school colors or informal school orchestra clothes. Use orchestra officers and/or leaders to speak to the rising students about what orchestra is

like at the next level; students will sell to students instead of the teacher doing all the talking.

Technique Clubs

Students will come before and after school for extra class if it is temporary and food is involved. Meet weekly for just a few weeks and serve goodies. Students as well as the teacher can help students with vibrato, shifting and/or an upcoming audition. Another suggestion is to have another local string teacher (the high school director?) assist with the technique club.

Field Trips

Students do not care where they are going as long as they are taking a trip somewhere. Trips do not have to occur during the school day. Most school districts require that the trip be somewhat educational, however; and it is possible to incorporate learning with fun.

A good idea is to plan a visit to observe a dress rehearsal for a local symphony or even a regular rehearsal of another school orchestra. Students love to watch other groups in action. It is very good to see the discipline and progress of a different orchestra. Plan a picnic or stop at a fast food restaurant for a meal on the way back.

Another idea is a field trip to a feeder elementary school or a school that has no orchestra program. A quick trip to play holiday music for the school lunch period (in progress) is always fun and does not have to take more time than an hour.

The trick to beating the winter blues (and increasing retention) is to keep a majority of orchestra students busy looking forward to a combination of musical, social, and competition-related goals that will ultimately give them pride in accomplishment. This pride usually leads to a sense of overall satisfaction with their orchestra and to continuity.

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