Teaching public school music in an urban or Title I school can be challenging—even overwhelming. However, it’s not just possible to develop a successful program in this setting, it can also be most rewarding for all involved, especially when you see the evidence that music is changing your students’ lives for the better!

A great band, choir, or orchestra program requires a critical balance of certain concepts and ingredients—a true recipe for success. When teaching in a Title I setting, be willing to think creatively to discover the most effective ingredients, and be sure you maintain a healthy balance of those ingredients. Many music directors lose sight of this, thus not keeping track of the big picture. As you think about how success can be achieved in your program, consider how the following ingredients could work for you:

**Developing Relationships**

Music educators must nurture their relationships with their students. Attend your students’ other school events. Be a bigger part of the school by volunteering to help with non-music events. Get to know your students and show your interest in who they are beyond musicians. Greet and welcome them at the door daily. Host social events and participate! Be a good listener. As I’ve heard Richard Floyd and others state, “Kids don’t care how much you know until they know how much you care!”

Because many Title I students come from challenging home environments, you must first gain their trust—rarely an easy task. Our programs can be the most structured, supportive environments they experience. Given that, some students may exhibit behavior issues until your trust is earned. Always be honest and never patronize your students. Show students respect, even when they are rude to you. Also remember that limited financial resources are not the fault of any student.

At the high school level, support relationships between older and younger students (e.g., create a buddy system between freshmen students and older leadership). This benefits all students and can serve as an effective recruiting tool.

Make it a priority to develop relationships with the parents of your students. Create opportunities to meet parents, starting with beginner drives. Get help from other directors or private instructors for instrument placement testing so you can spend that time meeting and greeting parents of potential students. Treat all parents with respect, and be consistent with student discipline and your program calendar (avoid any last-minute changes).

**Effective Communications**

Effective parent communication is an important ingredient when developing a music program in a Title I setting. Prevent problems by practicing good communication skills. Use the rule that if a parent makes any kind of contact with you, their email
or call must be returned within 24 hours. Same-day contact is best.

Solve serious parent concerns with a phone call or conference. Emails can be impersonal and leave the wrong impression. When speaking with parents about their child, always find something positive to say! Regardless of the offense, that student is the parent’s child! Create an atmosphere of openness, encouraging the parent to have a more receptive attitude toward helping correct their child’s behavior issues.

Show parents your respect by keeping written communications clear and concise. For letters you send home, include the message in the languages spoken by your students’ parents (if you need it, get help from colleagues or students to ensure proper translations). Require both student and parent printed names and signatures on these communications, and keep track of whether students returned the signature portion of the letter.

Advocate for Your Program

You must sell your program! Make it clear to students, parents, administration, and the community why participating in a music program is important. You must be your own advocate. At a Title I campus, this is extremely important given the sacrifices parents will make for their child to participate fully. Showcase individual and collective successes and achievements; display awards around the school, at concerts, and at beginner drives.

Successful concerts are often the best way to sell your program. Being well-prepared and having good attendance will make your students feel proud about their membership. Remember the old show business motto: leave them wanting more! Be organized and efficient so setup changes are fast and minimal. Our average concert length with four bands was just over an hour. Create a script for your comments to ensure your presentation during the concert is effective. Strive to have a large concert audience! Send a concert invitation letter home with required parent signature. Create awards to fit the recognition your students have earned, such as most improved, spirit, leadership. Be particular about uniform appearance! Make concert programs attractive, easy to read, and a showcase of student achievement.

Repertoire Choice

Selecting music has a great impact on any music program! Program music that both challenges and satisfies and that students and parents will enjoy. Regardless of the grade or skill level you teach, remember that the music you teach your students should be within their reach yet challenge them. When you program music that students are excited about, they will urge friends and parents to attend! On our holiday concert we often presented ‘Twas the Night Before Christmas. A favorite school teacher would be the narrator, and we invited the siblings and friends of our students to come to the stage to listen to the narration. Families love holiday traditions, and that selection resulted in a larger concert attendance.

Music Instruction

Your music program, especially in a Title I setting, will grow and retain a high percentage of members when students receive quality musical instruction. Teaching every child in your program to play or sing well must always be a top priority. Therefore, with limited funds, compare...
the value of a few students receiving private lesson scholarships to full group instruction by area master teachers. Utilize a master teacher or high-quality private teacher to teach your staff as well. Since private lessons might not exist or be utilized only by a limited number of students, you and your staff must be capable of teaching all voice or instrument fundamentals at the middle and high school levels.

Students who feel successful stay in music! Make it a priority to start your beginners correctly so no reteaching is needed. When beginning instrumental students are set up accurately, learning additional skills will be easier, leading to more frequent feelings of success. At the high school level, the relationship between success and retention applies as well, so you must be diligent and proficient when correcting bad playing habits (especially with transfer students).

The middle and high school head directors have the responsibility of overseeing the successful instruction of playing fundamentals and students’ continuing musical development.

Even with limited resources, it must be a priority that all students play on reliable, high-quality musical instruments in good working condition. Do everything possible to convince parents not to purchase instruments via the Internet so that there is an opportunity to inspect before purchase. Seek out grants through corporations, area churches, and your school district. Appeal to your school’s faculty to donate old family instruments or to sponsor a student. Buy instruments from former students who no longer play. Work with rental stores to modify their rental packages to lower the price, removing some accessories if possible. Stress to parents the advantages of renting or buying through a reputable music store so the instrument will be in good working condition. Emphasize that used instruments not acquired through a reputable music store need to be brought to the director for evaluation.

**Student Recruitment and Retention**

Particularly in a Title I setting, you must recruit and maintain membership effectively. If you are unable to take your performing ensemble to the elementary schools, host a fifth-grade night and advertise it! Play or sing something short and exciting and provide an attractive hand-out. Make a concise and well-organized presentation, emphasizing how cool it is to be in a music organization. If allowed, create a recruiting video to show. At the beginner drive, take pictures of new music students with their selected instruments and display them on a poster in each feeder elementary school. Provide each student a copy of their picture as well. This helps them stay excited about band over the summer.

Trips can have a big impact on Title I

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music students of all grade levels! Make trips affordable by setting up payment plans. Trips can positively expose students to things they’ve never seen before. Have a required parent/student trip meeting for overnight trips. Even if it is possible for only your top performing group to make the out-of-town trip, this can still be a great motivator for the entire program.

Administrator Support
While always important, in a Title I setting, administrative support is critical. It is your job to cultivate a positive relationship with your school administrators. If you work with a supportive administrator, like the principal who visited our classroom on a regular basis, you are fortunate—be sure you acknowledge their support regularly.

Carefully plan communication to help ensure a positive reception by your administrator. Written communication should be succinct, grammatically correct, organized, and positive in nature. Include justification that is fact-based—real data speaks! Clearly state the benefits for the students and the entire school.

For in-person conversations, find the right time that won’t compromise your administrator’s schedule (such as lunch or hall duty), knowing that appointments are preferred. When possible, avoid the busy times of the school year that are overwhelming for administrators (first and final weeks of school, standardized testing periods, etc.). Plan what you will say and bring notes! Estimate how long you plan to meet and provide the duration when you request the appointment. Do not meet with an administrator when you are extremely upset or emotional, as you are likely to say something you will eventually regret. Start your meeting by thanking the administrator for their support.

Invite administrators to observe specific classes. Show off that smooth-running beginner class where the students are achieving great things! This will be particularly effective if that class includes students known to exhibit discipline issues in other classes!

Changing Lives for the Better
As you teach students to love music and help them experience success as young musicians, if guided carefully, they will gradually learn to show you respect. Understand that many beginners, especially for Title I, join a music program for a reason other than developing musicianship. Very likely, it’s because their friends joined or the trips sounded fun. Work diligently to build rapport with every student in your program, and remember that music changes their lives for the better!

Scott McAdow served 39 years as a Texas public school band director. He currently supervises instrumental music student teachers for the University of Houston, is music director for Advent Lutheran Church in Houston, and is active across the state of Texas as a consultant and clinician.