How do we keep non-varsity groups from becoming scale jail, study hall, or worse? We would all likely agree that the most valuable asset in any music program is the individual musicianship of each student, regardless of placement or current level of talent or ability. So how can we get non-varsity students to become valuable members of our performing groups, or even All-State musicians? The answer lies in our ability to build students’ skills and establish a culture of excellence and commitment to great performances for non-varsity groups.

Most of us have great ideas about motivating and assessing students in a top group. Many students in our top bands, orchestras, and choirs are self-starters. They audition for All-Region and work on a solo just so they can stay in the top group. On the other hand, non-varsity players may have already figured out that they aren’t going to make the top ensemble this year. They may see All-State etudes and UIL solos as requiring musicianship beyond their current range or technical abilities. It can be a daunting task to motivate these non-varsity students, especially when the goals may seem out of reach.

Brian Merrill, a consultant at Rockwall Heath HS, told me four years ago that while he taught at Duncanville, only about 35 percent of freshmen entering the program would ever make it to the top band. My question was, “What do you do with the other 65 percent?” He taught me that I must build musicianship in every student and provide great performance opportunities for every band. To make the most of our non-varsity groups at RHHS, we began by making a list of what we were trying to accomplish in the Heath band program, especially with regard to our students’ individual musicianship. We asked ourselves:

1. What defines a successful year for our program?
2. How do we measure the success of our groups?
3. What is the most important thing we want our students to accomplish musically?
4. What is the most important thing we want to accomplish with our bands?
5. What can we do to make our program better?
6. What fulfills each of us professionally?

For some, a UIL Sweepstakes award is what defines a successful year, and for others it may be the size and scope of the organization. At Heath we view success as a combination of many elements, including awards and size (I won’t pretend that getting a one at contest or being named best-in-class at a festival isn’t important to me). But awards aren’t the things that last.

These four beliefs drive everything we do at RHHS:

1. Private lessons are a most important ingredient in developing great individual musicians.
2. All students should be held accountable for and perform at least some portion of each of the TMEA All-State etudes in the fall.
3. All students should learn and perform solos for UIL Solo and Ensemble contest in the spring.
4. Program literature should be age- and level-appropriate.

One of the ways we measure how effective we are as directors is tracking the number and percentage of students we have
enrolled in private lessons. It is much easier to get top players in private lessons, but it’s as important to get non-varsity students to sign up. At one point last year, only six students were not taking weekly private lessons. In the big picture, we believe private lessons for all is the most important ingredient in becoming the best organization we can become, and even more importantly, in developing our maximum individual musicianship.

Great non-varsity programs come from great overall music programs. It would be almost impossible to have one without the other, so it is very important to have all directors and private lesson staff in agreement on every program goal and objective. For instance, in the fall, the focus of our curriculum is the All-State etudes. Every student is held accountable for at least some portion of each etude. We do have to accommodate some of our younger players or players with special needs, and with some, we may even have to provide an alternate assignment. But everyone knows that in the fall nothing is more important than All-Region.

In the spring, our focus is on UIL solos. Each student is required to learn a UIL solo and perform it at contest. Students in the first and second bands are required to play a Class I solo, and memorizing the work is highly encouraged. We hold all students accountable for the preparation of the solo by requiring each student to play off one-third of the piece each week. We aim for playoffs to be finished two weeks prior to UIL so that student can have several (at least three) run-throughs with their accompanist.

There are four directors in our cluster, and as a staff we work to know each goal and objective we want students to achieve. We put them in writing and communicate them to students and parents in a clear and logical progression, often to the point of saturation.

The rules at Heath regarding objectives and assessments are:
1. Objective-based goals and assessments must align completely with the program, especially with regard to grading and advancement.
2. Objectives and assessments must be aligned with private lessons and section rehearsals. Private lesson staff must be in the loop with regard to objectives, and directors must support and assess private instruction.
3. We must communicate with parents. Parents must understand performance expectations and work as partners for building musicianship in their students. We use email, website, Facebook, and many phone calls.

Head directors and assistants must work to have common professional goals and objectives that are supportive of the welfare and benefit of each student and director. The direction of the program cannot be the sole responsibility of the head director, but instead must be a collaboration of all directors and assistants, including private lesson staff. If your head director does not consult you and other assistants regarding the direction of the program, talk with him or her and explain how important these considerations are to you, and ultimately to the program.

All of the teachers in our cluster work very well together for the benefit of each of our students. We avoid addressing a particular group as “my band,” “his band,” or “her band.” In the past three years, each director has conducted at least one piece on the concert contest program for multiple groups. This not only benefits the directors’ professional growth, but is equally beneficial for the students. We view each of our ensembles as important parts of “The Mighty Hawk Band,” and we expect each student to work daily to unlock the full range of his or her own musical potential.

In concert programming for our second and third groups, we think about what will appeal musically to our students. Some pieces, regardless of difficulty, are just not made for high school students. We try to consider the composition of the class and ask ourselves if the literature has musical value. One effective question we ask is, “If I were sitting in this band, would I want to study this work for two or three months?” Literature must be age-appropriate and substantive to create great performances and successful ensemble experiences. We make every effort to resist the temptation to choose music that lends itself to superior ratings but that would lessen the students’ musical interest, and thus growth.

Each band director is part of every rehearsal every day. No one group belongs to just one director. Each director must do his or her part to share their gifts and talents for the benefit of all. We split into smaller sections during band class as often as possible, especially when we are learning a new piece of music. We begin section rehearsals before and after school following the winter break. Each director takes care of all the sections in his or her group. We try to stay very small (in numbers) until all the notes and rhythms are learned. Later in the spring we may begin to combine sections. During full band rehearsals all directors are present. It’s always a good idea to have as many ears as possible listening and helping out. Directors make notes and share ideas and observations following the rehearsal. We meet and discuss progress (or the lack thereof) daily.

Carlos was our first non-varsity Wall of Fame student at RHHS. He never made the top band at Cain MS, but he was a founding member of the Mighty Hawk Band. He was a member of the third band for one and a half years. He attended All-Region auditions in each of his four years, made a one on his UIL solo several times, and attended TSSEC two years in a row. In the spring of 2009, Carlos auditioned in San Antonio at TMEA and won first chair tenor saxophone in the 4A All-State Band. I’m not sure when he broke the code or figured it all out, but after years of musical mediocrity, Carlos became an extraordinary musician. He graduated later that spring and is currently pursuing a degree in architecture.

All band students should learn how to play their instruments and show continuous improvement and musical growth through meaningful instruction, regular practice outside of the classroom, clearly defined goals and objectives, and age-appropriate, substantive literature. While it’s true that many students choose band, orchestra, or choir to become part of a group and participate in its social opportunities, we must continue to focus on the beautiful and expressive qualities of music and the discipline required in learning to play a musical instrument.

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