



## BAND: Tips for Successful Beginner Placement

BY ROBERT HERRINGS

**T**his is the time of year when you put on your marketing hat and help incoming students see why they want to be part of your program. As you begin planning for the next school year, consider these tips for successfully placing beginner students on instruments. These are based on my experience and what I have learned and adapted over the years from master teachers.

### Student and Parent Education

You must educate incoming students *and their parents* about band. Parents often hesitate because there is a cost, but once they realize the quality of the education their child will receive, the value of your class, and the benefits of being involved in music, they will want their child to be a part of the program. It is our duty to help get students placed on the correct instrument. Parents need to know and believe that we will have the utmost professionalism in determining which instrument is best for their child. When parents are on your side, it's even easier for them to support students in keeping an open mind when trying all the instruments. I always say, "The wand picks the wizard!"

### Balancing Numbers

Prior to your beginner testing, determine the ideal instrumentation for incoming students. This should be based on the number of students enrolled, the instrumentation needs in your advanced bands (knowing some students might not continue the next year), and the needs of your feeder programs. If your school feeds multiple programs, you must consider where your students will attend next. Being mindful of this ensures that each of your feeder programs gets a balanced instrumentation each year. Other aspects to consider when reviewing instrumentation are as follows:

- Available school-owned instruments (oboes, bassoons, horns, euphoniums, tubas, etc.).
- Student-to-teacher ratio. Too many students with one teacher does not allow for the teacher to effectively teach the class or to hear kids play individually on a weekly basis.
- Your teaching space. A comfortable classroom setup is important to support students learning their instruments and teachers moving around the classroom comfortably.

### Instrument Placement

First and foremost, ensure families and students understand that *no prior musical experience is required!* Some students will arrive with musical knowledge developed in elementary schools. Others, especially those moving in from other states without elementary music standards, may not. Developing a relationship and gathering information from elementary teachers offers great


insight into the future students of your program. Interviewing students to get to know them is monumental in determining what instrument offers them the greatest opportunity for success.

When placing students, I firmly believe that utilizing a "mini-instrument" (as noted in the list below) can offer a good idea of whether that instrument will be a proper fit for the student. This is to ensure that students get the most out of their experience in your class. Allowing students to touch, hold, and make sounds on the full instrument does get them excited, but is not really needed, aside from testing hand/arm size.

It is important to consider student physical features, such as the alignment of teeth, shape of the lips, and overall size. Hand-eye coordination and the ability to feel pulse and rhythm should also contribute to instrument recommendations. If you know an instrument isn't the right fit for a student, steer them in another direction, to one on which they might find more success. For instruments like oboe, bassoon, horn, and trombone, it is essential to test a student's ability to match pitch.

I have found the following to be predictive of student success on these instruments and thus a critical part of instrument testing:

- *Flute*: On the headjoint (uncovered), produce an A.
- *Clarinet*: On the mouthpiece, barrel, and ligature, produce a sharp F#.
- *Oboe*: Crowing on the reed, produce a C.
- *Bassoon*: Crowing on the reed alone, produce an F. Playing on the reed attached to the bocal, produce a C or C#.
- *Saxophone*: On the mouthpiece attached to the neck, produce a G#.
- *Brass*: Buzzing on the mouthpiece, strive to get students to produce a fuzzy buzz before you try to get them to play different pitches. If the student is buzzing consistently low and cannot raise pitch with instruction, avoid placing them on trumpet or horn. If the student is buzzing consistently high and cannot lower pitch with instruction, avoid placing them on low brass instruments.
- *Tuba*: In my experience, hearing kids on the full instrument is crucial to placement.

However we approach instrument testing, our focus should always remain on supporting student success, and ultimately this will support overall program success. 



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