

RECRUIT & RETAIN

by Karen Cross

SCHEDULING

RELATIONSHIPS

ENVIRONMENT

SOCIAL • FAMILY

OWNERSHIP • PRIDE

MARKETING • EDUCATION

While our state requires every student to complete a fine arts course during their middle school years, band, orchestra, and choir classes aren't the only ones that satisfy this requirement. And after those who do enroll in a music class complete their first year and face a host of course options, what will motivate them to return? This reality has become one of the most challenging aspects of a middle school music teacher's job.

TMEA recently surveyed middle school music teachers to learn more about the challenges they face and the strategies they employ to improve their recruitment and retention efforts. While we offer some information here about the challenges, our focus is on the strategies teachers use to improve recruitment and retention. We learned about a variety of methods in use, and we hope one or more could prove effective for you as you begin another school year and work to offer a high-quality music education to all students.

The Greatest Challenges

Members reported the following as the primary roadblocks to recruiting and retaining students in their music programs.

Recruiting: The greatest challenge is the myriad of other elective choices and local course requirements. Other significant issues are restrictions on recruiting efforts, the financial impact of participation, and the choice of other music programs (e.g., students choosing band over choir).

Retention: Once students complete a beginner music class, their opportunity to explore other electives and the push to take high school classes during middle school are the greatest challenges to keeping them in a program. Two other significant reasons reported were participation in athletics and students' general

lack of personal commitment.

Despite the challenges, members also report that the majority of beginners return for a second and third year in their program. However, retention rates drop significantly going into high school.

What Can We Do About It?

The reasons students don't enroll or don't remain in your programs likely aren't surprising, and some might truly be out of your control. However, the feedback we received from teachers like you includes a wide variety of strategies to meet these challenges. The following are just a few of the many ideas offered by survey responders. Additional ideas and more survey details are online at www.tmea.org/recruit-retain.

RECRUITING STRATEGIES

The following are just some of the hundreds of ideas on how to improve recruitment efforts:

Schedules/Classes

- I made a sample schedule graduation plan entitled "How to take choir from 6th through 12th grades." It includes variations of schedules that show how to take choir + athletics, choir + HS credits, etc.
- We pushed for our campus leadership to stop requiring every sixth grader to take a leadership and study skills class. This freed them up to choose two electives.
- Gender-specific choirs—guys get to be with the guys, and girls don't have to deal with silly boys.

The band director and I go to the elementary school and talk with students during their music class about what each of our groups offers. We have a good working relationship, so there is no competition. We want what will fit best for each student.

Visiting Feeders and Showcasing Future Opportunities

- In early September, I invite feeder schools to sing a unison piece at our Christmas concert. The piece is accessible and fun and allows us to have a joint rehearsal where students get to visit our campus during their school day. We highlight their directors and put all student names into a drawing for gift cards we present during the concert.
- It made a big difference when we exposed fifth graders to high school marching band in the fall. Elementary students come watch a high school marching band morning rehearsal. I introduce the instruments and feature outstanding students. High school students love doing it because they remember taking part in the event as a fifth grader.
- Current orchestra students perform for prospective students. Students attending get to try the instruments, playing the D and A strings (I and V chords). I play a fiddle piece while they play along. Many get excited that they can play an instrument in such a short time.
- I teach a small group of talented sixth graders UIL contest music and include them in our contest choir. Usually 100% of these students enroll in choir after this experience.
- We invite all fifth graders to attend every performance and a few social events throughout the year.
- I brought athletes to the feeder schools to talk to students about being in band and sports.
- I take one day off and visit all fifth-grade music classes and have a choir day. I teach them a few warm-ups (current students choose them), do a mini-presentation about me (build the

relationship early), let them ask questions, and show a video of my current students explaining why they are in choir (students record and edit the video themselves).

- The best recruitment result is when I visit each fifth-grade music class individually with 2–3 current orchestra students (who went to that school) who demonstrate their instruments.
- We test every fifth grader on instruments. Many students are simply afraid to try. This eliminates that obstacle and shows them they can be successful. And we can use this time to correct any misinformation and give the student guidance about their options. This has significantly helped with recruiting.
- My band and orchestra colleagues are great—we have a fine arts team approach to recruitment. Sure, each of us would like the students to choose our program, but at the end of the day, what’s most important is that the students have a quality experience in one of them.

Marketing

- We educate elementary students and their parents with an attractive brochure that includes photos and data about the benefits of being in choir and the differences that students will experience at the junior high level. I also make a point to discuss these differences at our fifth-grade recruiting tour.
- Current students write letters to fifth graders interested in choir. They are handwritten, decorated, and delivered to the elementary school students. The small social events we have and our successes at UIL contest help recruit seventh and eighth graders who see the fun and success our students experience.

- We take band kids to talk with the students at the feeder schools. Students talking to other students is always received very well and gives the presenters great pride in their program.
- I display pictures of our fun, and we have a Wall of Fame outside the classroom for our students who earn 100s on their sightreading tests.
- We maintain an advocacy website with information and materials to show the value of participating.

Financial Aid

Students who never had a chance at another program are given every opportunity to be successful in music because even the binders, pencils, reeds, and mouthpieces are provided for every single child in grades 4–7. It does not cost our students a dime to participate in the band program.

Relationships

Recruitment stems from building relationships. By making a regular effort to care about their performances and assist with rehearsals, you build rapport with students, and they learn to trust you. Each visit is a deposit in the bank for when they choose schedules.

Social Engagement

- Each sixth grader invites a friend who will be a good fit for choir to a social event where we play games. We take the opportunity to meet all of the guests and talk with them about choir. We gained students and also retained many of our sixth graders—especially boys!
- We use social media a lot, especially Instagram. We document fun events and post several pictures every week of the things we do in band class. We place a lot of “Check us out on Instagram” posters around the middle and elementary schools.

Parent Communications

We communicate with parents in English and Spanish in our letters and our information pamphlet, and we let parents know that one of the directors speaks Spanish. We also emphasize the support we offer students academically as

well as musically. In a community where many parents are working multiple jobs to make ends meet, this kind of support and our focus on being a family seems to be a strong draw.

RETENTION STRATEGIES

The following are a few of the hundreds of strategies employed by teachers across the state to improve retention in their music programs:

Schedules

- I convinced the school board to stop double-blocking math at the seventh- and eighth-grade levels so students could take two electives.
- This year, we pushed hard with our seventh graders to sell the benefits of staying in band. We emphasized the flexibility of schedules and the ability to postpone high school credits until they are in high school. We did this regularly throughout the spring semester, and our retention increased to about 85% this year.
- Last year, some parents of our eighth-grade choir students wrote a letter to the parents of seventh graders outlining the benefits of their child staying in choir and waiting to take some courses until high school. We also had current juniors or seniors speak with current seventh and eighth graders about how they fit in all their classes, extracurriculars, and stayed in choir.
- Our district has published functional graduation plans for various endorsements and athletic course desires that all include four years in a fine arts course sequence. This helps to persuade at least a few students each year to stay in the program.
- We got a waiver from our coaches to let students play on the team without

Often, students won't care about your subject until they know you care about them.

being enrolled in the athletics class. This freed up the students' schedules and allowed them to take everything and still participate in sports before and after school and in the games.

Ownership/Pride

- We opened our school four years ago, and the first thing we focused on was branding our logo and providing spirit shirts and other items. We have since built pride in our band and our school, performing at as many local community events as possible. This has created an environment in which all students want to belong—40% of our student body participates in band.
- We have a Renaissance Club for students involved in sports and fine arts. Students are recognized throughout the year for this accomplishment by having their picture on the Renaissance Club Board with details on all they do while keeping a high grade point average. They are also recognized at the awards ceremony and at each concert. Coaches also honor and recognize these students.

If you build a successful program, students will come; if you are **kind to them**, they will stay.

- We award our three-year choir members with a trophy at the end of their eighth-grade year. We want them to know that their commitment is valuable to our program. We have slowly had more students remain in choir over the past few years.
- I encourage my students to invite a friend in before school begins. We allow their friend who isn't in choir to watch them practice.
- I try to keep the music interesting, whether it is simple rhythm drills, vibrato exercises, or more challenging concert music. Constant reminders of their progress also keep students motivated (sticker progress charts or flashback videos/slideshows of their playing from last year). They also participate in section contests each week—playing a rhythm, sightreading a line, etc. The section with the most points at the end of the year wins the

Section of the Year award.

- We started a Band Buddy program, where junior high band volunteers travel to the elementary schools to tutor sixth graders on their instruments. This gives the sixth graders something to look forward to and increases ownership in the junior high students.
- I begin transferring leadership roles to seventh graders in January. They are seated beside and teamed with eighth-grade leaders. This helps them begin to visualize their future roles in choir as leaders and integral members of the organization.

Environment/Culture

- The best thing is to create a culture of family, acceptance, and fun. It is important to alter instructional strategies and make room for laughter. In addition, find the right balance between high achievement/contest ratings and learning more music and playing music that interests the students.

- I have improved retention by maintaining a positive, open, and energetic classroom environment. I also begin conversations with students early on about what orchestra will look like next year, concerns they have, and benefits of building a skill.
- I work hard to cultivate a culture of family in our program so students and parents trust me. I talk with students about the importance and value of music education so they can relay that to their parents when making course choices. While half of our students clear their course selections with their parents, the other half make their own decisions, so they also need to be well-informed.

Relationships

- When middle school students enjoy being around their teacher, they tend to stay in the program. As long as

we can get them to stay, we can get them to work. If students don't feel like they matter or if they feel invisible, they won't stick around. We try to compliment each beginner at least once a week. At the varsity band level, we do the same with each section at least once a week, and we try to reach individuals at least once every two or three weeks.

- I believe students stay because I am kind to them and I treat them with respect. If you build a successful program, students will come; if you are kind to them, they will stay. I also allow students who want to be in other activities to single-block band class (they are in band class every other day).
- Building good relationships with the students is critical. They learn while having fun, and they know about me, my family, and funny stories from when I was their age. I also try to show them they are worthy and valued in my room.

Excellence/Performances

- I push them harder than they think they can handle; then I reward it big time. Middle schoolers want to work hard. They want to be challenged. I try never to underestimate the students because they grow so much from sixth to eighth grade. It's such a cool thing to witness!
- Students perform as often as possible. I've learned that most sixth graders get bored throughout the year. Early in the year, we have a low-pressure public performance and block party where students play 2–3 lines from their books and possibly something together. Afterward they get food from food trucks with their family and enjoy the rest of the performances. At our holiday concert, I encourage parents to listen for the differences only a couple of months has made. This pumps up the students again. During the spring, we prepare for solo and ensemble and a band competition for beginners.

- We promote the private lesson program by having voice teachers perform for the students. We have half of the choir program in voice lessons—this helps with retention. Once invested in music, kids are less likely to leave.
- Perform often in front of peers—in the foyer, at pep rallies, for assemblies, at middle school football games (national anthem), and more. Students love to sound good in front of classmates!

Building Excitement

- We have sixth graders meet as an ensemble during the last period of the day on Fridays to get a full band experience. This year we will retain all but two students from sixth to seventh grade.
- We host a night where our middle school feeders bring their students and our high school students conduct master classes with them on their Region etudes. The evening's social activities are also student-led.

2016–2017 Memberships Have Expired!

All TMEA 2016–2017 memberships expired June 30. Also, if covered, liability insurance expires August 20.

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Verify and update your email and mailing addresses. Your receipt and membership card are sent to your email address.

Plan to enter students to an audition?

Your membership must be active to do so.

Thank you for your membership in TMEA! Our association continues to be the largest state music educators association in the country, and for that we are justly proud. The strength of TMEA, however, is not only in its size but in the quality of its membership. The strength of music programs in our schools is rooted in the dedication of its teachers, all united in a mission to provide the best music education for all Texas schoolchildren.

Membership in an organization of over 13,000 music educators carries with it benefits inherent from this strength in numbers. TMEA is your voice to the Texas Legislature and the

State Board of Education. In addition to representation by TMEA leaders, members enjoy a myriad of benefits, including access to group health insurance, low-cost liability insurance, professional development opportunities, online and printed pedagogical and advocacy resources, and more.

TMEA strives to provide meaningful professional development for our members and wonderful opportunities for our high school students through the audition process and through Texas Future Music Educators.

Renew today to continue supporting the future of music education in Texas.

**Renew now, and remind
your colleagues to do the same!**



Survey Summary

Over 550 middle school teachers answered this survey.

65% of responders are head directors of their middle school program.

Who Took the Survey:

Primary Teaching Area:

Band: 54%
Orchestra: 13%
Choir: 31%
Other: 2%

MS UIL Classification

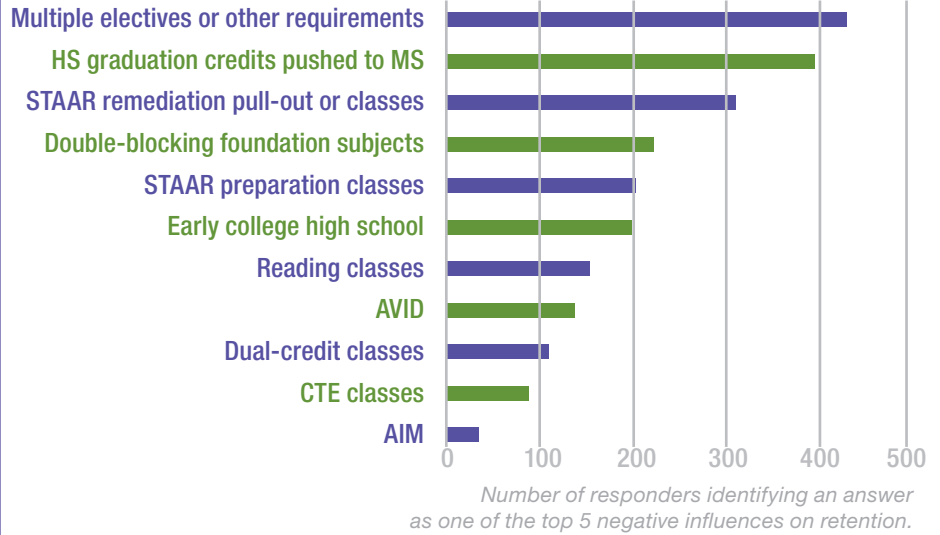
1C: 12% 2C: 44% 3C: 44%

UIL Classification of HS fed by Responders' MS

1A: 2% 3A: 8% 5A: 30%
2A: 4% 4A: 14% 6A: 42%

Issues Affecting Retention in Music Programs

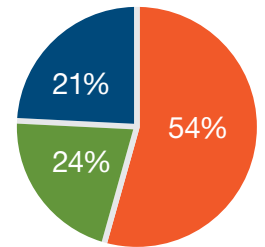
Responders selected from the following and ranked those they believe are the top 5 negative influences on retention.



Go to tmea.org/recruit-retain for more survey data and additional recruiting and retention strategies.

Participation in middle school programs over three years

A majority of teachers report that in the last three years, participation in middle school programs has increased.

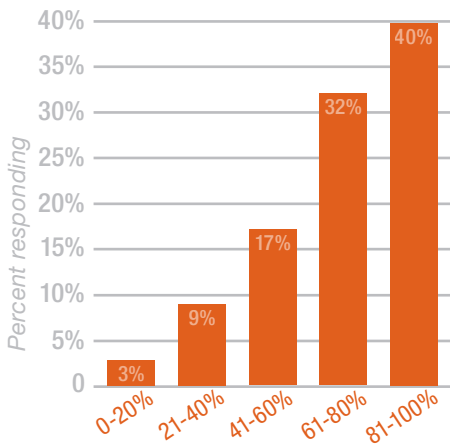


● Increased ● Decreased ● Remained unchanged

Retention Rates

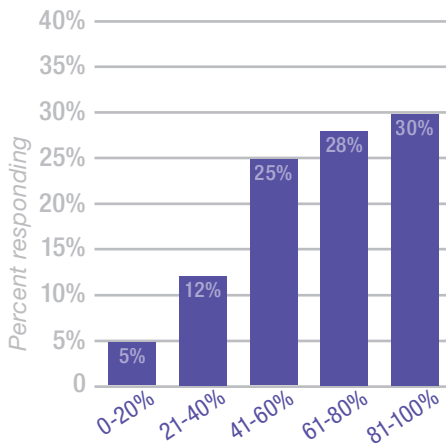
The following are the estimated percentages of students who continue in a music program:

Second Year



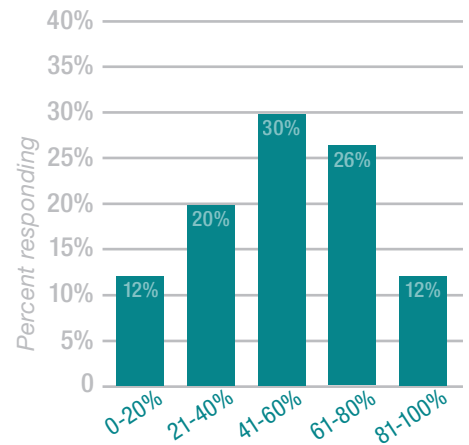
Students continuing in a second year.

Third Year



Students continuing in a third year.

High School



Students continuing in high school

- We have a sixth-grade solo contest at the end of the year, and when students and parents witness that measure of success, they are more likely to sign up for band.
- I think what has helped the most is doing orchestra karate for the beginners. They don't even realize they are doing scales and finger patterns, and it sets them up nicely for the future years. For the seventh and eighth graders, having more social events such as movie or game night is key. Keeping them playing as much as possible has also improved retention.
- We invite sixth graders who pass off a scale to come watch the top band rehearse.
- I show our recruiting video to current band students and ask them for feedback. While this sounds like a recruiting effort, having them view and evaluate it has also been a successful way to keep them interested.

Ensemble Type

- I started an eighth-grade mixed Symphonic Choir, and one requirement is that students have to have been in choir the past two years. All our students wanted to advance, and I didn't have as many issues while I was teaching.
- Splitting my beginner choir classes by gender has made a huge difference in retaining students.
- Placing students into ability-based groups has helped us. Find the kids who have the motivation to excel and give them opportunities through specialized instruction.
- Kids love jazz and steel drums! To be in those classes they also have to be in band, so these additional groups have helped overall retention.

Academic Monitoring/Assistance

- Our retention has improved because we work with students struggling in their other academic classes. We check grades weekly and meet individually if a student is failing in any class. We work with students so they will tell us why they have a failing grade, what they are doing to fix it, and what

they need from us or another teacher to help. Our students' grades are up, their STAAR scores are up, and they are staying in the program rather than dropping for remediation classes.

- It helps when I contact other teachers to learn which students are struggling so I can actively support them in bringing up their grades.


Financial Support

- We help parents with some of the expenses (but not all) required for

participation in band.

- We help students obtain private lesson scholarship funds.

Learn More

Thanks go to TMEA members who took time to offer their perspective and valuable advice. For more details on the survey results and for more strategies to improve recruitment and retention, go to www.tmea.org/recruit-retain. 

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