

From Turmoil to Tranquility: Managing the Middle School Rehearsal Hall



by Cecilia Fraschillo

Students of all ages are most productive and most willing to learn when they are in an environment in which they are made to feel secure. The younger the students, the more need there is for such an environment. Creating a successful middle school band program begins with a well-managed classroom, long before the first note is fashioned. Creating routines that work and using them on a daily basis will insure the formation of good habits that are tantamount to the success of the individual student.

1. Start at the beginning—entering the room. On the first day, meet the students at the door and have them bring everything they have with them to a chair and sit down. Then, explain to and show them where they should put back packs/binders/books/purses—anything they do not need for class—when they enter the room each day. Have them stow these things as you explain, being sure to tell them what they will need today (pencil, etc.).

Your preparation for this: before the first day of classes, determine where the students can keep their things during class. Determine how many students are in your biggest class and be sure that there is enough room in that space to store the belongings of everyone in that class. Use an area that is easily accessible and that is visible. Do not use a separate room unless you have adequate staff to monitor the space when students are present. Have the students store these things in an orderly fashion from the first day.

Maintenance: Each day, stand at the classroom door as the students enter for each class and remind them of the procedure. Check at the beginning of each class each day to determine that the students have put all unneeded items in the designated space and have stowed them

correctly. Take the time to correct errors immediately. After a time period determined by you (one week, two weeks?), prescribe a consequence for error and enforce it. Be sure the “punishment fits the crime” (minus two or three points, etc.). You can always make the consequence a bit tougher if the same students continue to have problems with this.

2. Explain to the students when they should be in the classroom, when they should be in their seats, and what they should have with them. In most schools, students must be in the classroom by the time the tardy bell rings. I used this rule, and then I set a timer for two minutes as soon as the tardy bell stopped ringing. When the timer sounded, they were to be seated in the correct chair, and were to have with them all that they needed for class.

Your preparation: Determine the times and what signal you will use. Determine the consequences for not meeting these requirements. Most schools have a consequence in place for unexcused tardiness. In my experience the students received a detention for each unexcused tardy, and a disciplinary referral when they accumulated three unexcused tardies. This system always worked well to prevent further infractions. When a student was late to his/her seat or did not have all needed materials, I subtracted three points from the daily grade. I did, though, provide them with an opportunity to earn back those points.

Maintenance: Stand at the classroom door until the tardy bell rings, or until all students have entered if that occurs before the tardy bell. Set the timer when the tardy bell stops (if you choose to use a timer). Be at the front of the class when the timer sounds (or any other prescribed signal). If you want the students to be ready for class on time, you must be ready also. Indicate

by name any who are not seated and record this in the grade book (or elsewhere) immediately. Do not allow discussion; tell any student who wishes to discuss to speak with you after class. Begin class immediately.

3. Designate a specific place for each student to keep his/her instrument and folder, and a specific location in which to assemble and disassemble the instrument. Individual cubbies or lockers are the ideal situation. Instrument storage units can be ordered from several suppliers. If this expense is prohibitive, many times the maintenance department in your school system can build these units for you. I have had this done in the past and it has worked well. I drew the diagram using measurements somewhat similar to those specified for the ready-built units. Label the individual cubbies with the student names. (It can be more efficient for them to keep the instrument and folder in the same place instead of in two separate spaces.)

If cubbies are not feasible or possible, take stock of what you do have and develop a way to make that work. Shelves can be divided into specific spaces by drawing lines on them. I have used chairs against the walls as cubbies for euphoniums, and pairs of chairs for tubas. If you have only a few players and enough room (and chairs), those instruments can each have a permanent home in those chairs. If there are too many instruments for each to have its own chair, find a place to store the instruments when not in use, and have the individual players bring the horn in the case to the chair(s) at the beginning of class, and return it to the storage place at the end of class. In these situations, it is also possible to have those players (of euphonium, tuba) store their “belongings”

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under the chair during class, freeing up more space in the designated "belonging storage area".

If a table (shelf?) is available, French horns can be stored under the table when not in use, and the table can be used to open the case and take out the horn. I have never been able to position a French horn case on a chair so that it doesn't fall from the chair when opened.

Flutes, clarinets, and oboes can be assembled at the chair and the cases latched and placed under the chair for rehearsal. If there is no other area available for trumpets and alto saxophones, these can also be assembled at the chair. However, the cases for these instruments do not always fit under the chair. They can be placed right next to the chair legs on the side or behind the chair. Keep in mind that the set should be kept neat, and that the teacher should be able to move about freely among the students. Also, it is imperative that the cases remain latched and as inaccessible as possible during rehearsal. It is very tempting for students to rustle in the case during rehearsal if it is open and accessible.

Trombones, bassoons, bass clarinets, big saxophones – if possible, it is best for these instruments to be assembled away from the set. Shelves, empty chairs not in the set, even the floor (away from the set) are possibilities. These instrument cases should only be brought to the chair if there is no other solution.

I have tried many "designs" for percussionists. I changed procedures and details as needed each year. The last eight years that I taught full-time was in a 7th and 8th grade middle school. In a three year school or high school this plan may not be feasible. Here is what seemed to work best in my situation. There was a large expanse of the back wall of the band hall that was not occupied by cubbies. I was able to divide the space into 12 "stations." (These were not lined off.) I put a hook on the wall in the middle of each station, and hung on the hook a laminated card printed with the number of the station. The percussionists would assemble their snare drums on Monday morning

and leave them assembled until the end of class on Friday. At this time they would pack them up in hopes that they would take them home to practice on the "real" drum. (I had them keep their personal drum pads and an extra pair of sticks at home for practice purposes. This eliminated the need for them to carry a pair of sticks around with them.)

The drum case was stored flat against the wall directly under the number. When not in use in class, the drum (on the stand) was placed with 2 of the 3 legs touching the case. The band owned a set of Real-Feel drum pads. Each pad was numbered (using a Sharpie) corresponding to the station number. The pad stayed on top of the drum. The music stands used in the percussion section were also numbered to correspond with the station. When not in use, the music stand was placed directly in front of the snare drum with the table facing out (so the number was visible). For class each day, each percussionist would move his/her equipment to the correct place and return it to the station at the end of class.

At this point I should mention that I used stools for the drummers. They DID NOT sit on the stools to play in class, but did sit on them when they were not playing. The stools were stored between the stations against the wall when not in use. The percussionists could practice on the pads when they were not playing with the class. When they were playing with the class, I could have them use the pads on the drums, or place the pads on the stools while they were standing.

Your preparation: Assess the logistical situation in your band hall. Determine what you can do with what you have. Determine what else you need and the process necessary to get it. Decide how you will exist with what you have until you can get what you need. Write down or sketch your plan, divide and label spaces/cubbies as needed. The Highsmith Catalog (for libraries) offers plastic label carriers with pressure sensitive tape on the back. These come in 3 foot lengths and can be cut to size (I used 6" lengths) using a paper cutter. From the same company labels of that size

can be ordered, and can be printed from the computer using a template. These work well to label cubbies/spaces with student names, and the labels can be changed out each year without removing the carriers.

Maintenance: Monitor your band hall each day and insist that students store instruments in the correct place, and that they assemble and disassemble instruments in the correct place. Be on the lookout for things that are not working as well as they should, seek for a better solution, and make the necessary change. Do not be afraid to make changes as needed. The students will appreciate your trying to make things easier for them, and they will (should) cooperate accordingly.

4. Organize the chairs and stands in the set and in the room. Take any extra chairs and stands out of the set. Have a specific seating arrangement for each class, and do the best you can to straighten the set between classes.

Your preparation: Check the enrollment for each class. Set the chairs and stands as you want them for your largest class. Determine how you can fit the other classes in that set so that you do not have to move chairs between classes. Assign seats for each class. Do not hesitate to change seat assignments as needed, but do have a consistent set and seat assignments for each class.

Maintenance: Check constantly that students are in the correct seat. If stands need be moved for some classes, assign that task to students. Make changes as needed, and keep the students informed as to those changes.

Other points to consider:

A. If we expect students to take good care of the instruments and not abuse them, we must give them time to do so. STOP rehearsal with enough time left for students to properly put away the instruments and music. Give them no less than 4 minutes, more if needed. Have the students return to their chairs and be seated before you dismiss them, even if the

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bell rings first. Especially in larger classes, everyone does not have to head for the door at one time. Dismiss them by rows or sections, etc. Having them seated and calm at the end of class reinforces the concept that the band hall is an orderly classroom. Communicate to your students that the room is filled with valuable instruments and equipment, many that cannot be replaced, many that belong to individual students. This is not a place for horseplay or chaos!

B. If possible be in the band hall before school begins so that the students can bring in instruments and put them away, and after school so that they can retrieve the instruments and take them home to practice. Students are much more likely to take the horns home (and the instruments are much safer) if they do not have to carry them around during the day.

C. Schools and band programs differ greatly, and specific routines and methods that work in one situation may not work in

another. Constantly take stock of what is working and what is not working in your program. Identify the problem, identify what you want to happen, determine what has to be done to make it happen, and then take action to get it done. Do not hang with tradition just for tradition's sake. If you are doing something just because it has always been done that way and it is not working, then make a change that does work.

You do not have to live with chaos or lack of routine or lack of organization for an entire year. You can start now to make changes. Start at the beginning and institute one change or organizational procedure at a time. As you get one routine established, move on to the next. Gradually you will find that your students are happier and more content because they are in an environment that is predictable, secure, and actually enjoyable. ■

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Mrs. Frascillo has served on the Executive Board of the Mississippi Bandmasters Association, along with two previous terms on the NBA Board of Directors as a middle school representative. She was awarded a Citation of Excellence from the NBA in 2004. In 1998, she was named Teacher of the Year by the Hattiesburg Public School District, and the Fifth Congressional District through the office of Congressman Gene Taylor. She has served as an adjudicator and clinician throughout the Southeast at the district and state levels. She is a member of the NEA, the NBA, Phi Beta Mu, and the Mississippi Bandmasters Association. Her bands have received consistent superior ratings at each level throughout her teaching career.

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