

100% RETENTION RATE? “GO TEAM!”

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Students continue to participate in our music programs because they cannot imagine school without the meaningful engagement that our courses provide. For one reason or another however, we continue to lose some students along the way.

One South Carolina school district came to the realization that they could do something about it. Below is their story and some initial steps they are taking to work toward the vision of leading 100% of their students to a life-long relationship with music-making.

“Go Team!” We’ve all heard it a MILLION times – this familiar cheer for an intensive sporting event where the outcome has a significant impact one way or the other. Using this same approach – i.e. the concept of an intensive goal creating a significant impact as a result – innovative school district music departments across the country, like the School District of Pickens County (SDPC), NC, are taking the “Go Team!” approach to a whole new level!

During the district-wide E3—*Engage, Excite and Enrich*—Professional Development Day in early August, the SDPC Music Educators were challenged to explore how they might better to not only *Engage, Excite and Enrich* the lives of their students, but also to communicate the great work of their program and the high achievements of their students to their various constituencies—e.g. students not yet participating in the music program, school faculty and staff, district leadership, parents, and the greater community. Even though these educators were doing a tremendous job with their own programs, there was a sense of being untethered—as if there were no specific district-wide direction and as if they were on their own to “do it all.” Their perception was that even though they were each working diligently, they were not getting the traction they had hoped for and, in fact, deserved—to capture the attention of these various constituencies and to ensure that a common message was being delivered to all.

It was my privilege to have been asked to facilitate the PD activities which involved facilitating the entire “unification” process with the K-12 music education faculty for the day. It didn’t take too long to discover the first item that needed immediate attention—that being that although these teachers all worked in the same department within the same district, they didn’t all know each other! Surprised? Probably not. Is this a problem? Probably yes!

So we thus kicked off the day with introductions and everyone was courteous, yet skeptical. We all know how these PD sessions can be so it was my initial charge to get this group of approximately thirty (30) music educators—many who had just met one

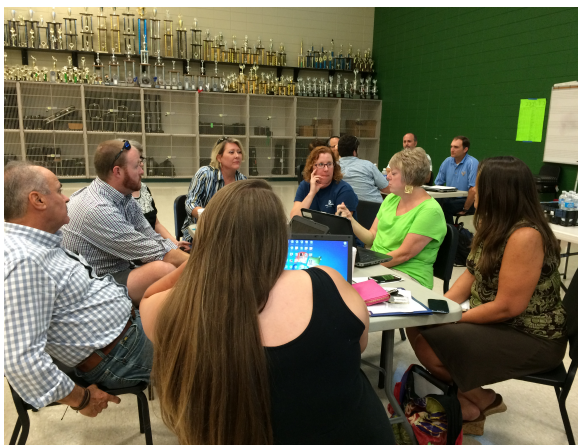
another for the very first time—to jump on the band wagon and move forward with a unified purpose.

Our initial discussions centered around the conception of what others in our circle of influence—e.g. parents, administrators, community—think that we do. To encourage participation, we tossed around a cute little teddy bear bean bag that I had brought along from Las Vegas from one person to the next asking them to respond to the questions that were posed and little by little, I could see a few smiles here and there and soon, it became my job to bring the cadre of music educators back to order. It was EXACTLY what I had hoped for. We discovered that of all of the above groups, it was the music educators themselves who were the only ones who had an accurate comprehension of what they do and how it matters. The aha moment! This led us to understand that it was imperative that we generate a group identity.

We then spent a great deal of time looking at statistics that show how music-making really does effect students and we subsequently encouraged each other to share personal stories of students whose lives had been changed by it. Along the way, we kept bumping into that ever-present question, “Why music?” Another aha moment! We were going to have to come up with an answer to this question that would satisfy each and every one of the teachers. Little did they know how the answer to this question would come to have such a significant consequence for all of them.

Breaking up into groups was the best way to give everyone the opportunity to be heard so with some guidance through the providing of a set of specific questions, we broke into groups according to feeder alignment which led to four (4) separate sets of teachers working together to come up with a “unified” answers to

1. Who are we?
2. What do we envision for our community? and thus,
3. What is our purpose and why music?



This break-out session resulted in a comprehensive, inspiring and invigorating process that elicited inclusive conversations that yielded a surprising discovery—the realization

that as varied as each teacher's concerns were with regard to issues they were having to deal with in their particular "world" at their particular school, when it came right down to it, each teacher really wanted the same thing—for ALL STUDENTS to have a life-long relationship with active music-making. WOW! This philosophy is not about trying to create more symphony musicians. Rather, it's that if students continue participating into adulthood as active music-makers—whether at church or in any variety of community groups—their lives would be substantially fulfilled and thus considerably more productive, uplifting, and joyful. Thus, what they are really doing is preparing students to go out into the world equipped with the means to enjoy a significant and meaningful life. Below are the impressive answers to these two questions that "team" came up with and refined after coming out of the initial break-out sessions.

Who are we?

The district-wide, K-12 Music Department is the inclusive team of Music Educators which supports and promotes Music Education within the School District of Pickens County by providing quality, sequential instruction through fulfilling, life-changing opportunities for all of its children.

What do we envision for our community?

The School District of Pickens County K-12 Music Department envisions a community where all are actively engaged in life-long, music-making activities.

What is our purpose and why music?

The Mission of the School District of Pickens County K-12 Music Department is to enhance the overall quality of life for all children by inspiring in them the desire to experience the joy of music-making throughout life.

It was time to break for lunch and someone shouted, "let's all go to lunch together!" Once it was determined which restaurant could actually seat thirty (30) people all at once in one area, we were on our way to the very first "SDPC Annual Music Educator's Luncheon." The group continued to buzz all through lunch and truly enjoyed "breaking bread" together

So what would happen next? We returned from lunch to being working on how they, as music educators, could really drive their newly-established Vision and Mission. With just a few ideas to prime the pump, the new "team" went into action scoring goal after goal! Their ideas for "actionable items" just kept coming and coming but most important, they agreed to begin working TOGETHER consistently so that they could continue to move this undertaking forward. The first order of business was to find a way to articulate their game plan.

Thankfully, we had sufficient time to strategize a number of specific actions. These action items will not only serve to *Engage, Excite and Enrich* (the original goal of the PD) but also to promote the vision for elementary students to picture themselves as high school music students and for the parents of these students to envision their children as high school music students right from the very beginning.

1. A district-wide music department mission statement will be formalized and promoted to create increased district/community awareness.
2. Small ensemble performances will be scheduled at the beginning of every school board meeting with time provided afterward for the representative school board member to speak to the students about their accomplishments in music.
3. Each music teacher will include a recruiting section on their school website.
4. An educational plan/flow chart will be developed that will prescribe how students can continue taking music classes through all four (4) high school years. This will be provided appropriately to the parents of music students.
5. The elementary band students will be featured with the high school band as VIP guests at one of the halftime shows annually. The announcer will quickly call out each elementary student by name and each will run onto the field into position in front of a high school student who plays a like instrument. The groups will be conducted by the elementary school teacher/director who will also choose the material to be performed. This could be as simple as a phrase made up of two or three different notes played over a series of chord changes performed by the high school band. Dance moves will be included! The purpose is to bring the elementary school students into the high school “arena” and for their parents to begin envisioning their elementary school students as a high school band student. The high school booster parents will provide complimentary refreshments and VIP seating for the parents of the elementary students.
6. The high school instrumental directors will choose an appropriate selection and score a recorder part to feature the elementary school students on that selection in the Spring Concert. This event is also geared toward having the students view themselves as high school instrumental students and for the parents to see their children as high school instrumental students performing right on the high school stage.
7. The elementary and middle schools teachers will invite the high school teachers to conduct a piece on one of their school concerts.
8. The high school principals will work with the middle school principals to facilitate scheduling so that recurring visits become part of the regular teaching assignment.
9. The high school parent booster organization will host the middle school parent organization for a chili/spaghetti supper to visit with them about the many benefits of participating in the high school program. Brief entertainment will be provided by the high school students at every meeting. Several high school students will also be invited to speak to the middle school parents about the impact the high school program has had on them personally.

10. The high school students will write congratulatory notes to the middle school and elementary students as appropriate to commend them on an extraordinary performance, being chosen for something special, etc. This activity is to develop a “Big Brother/Big Sister” relationship with the younger students.

11. The high school students will attend the concerts given by the programs that they participated in before coming to the high school. After the concert, they will provide positive feedback to the students of that program via written notes (see #10) or emails to the director to be read aloud to the students during class.

12. The principal of one of the middle/elementary schools will be invited to provide remarks at one of the concerts being held at the high school and vice versa. Elementary/middle school parents will gain a sense of confidence in the high school program when they see the high school principal speaking so favorably about it at this event. Conversely, the high school parents will be so impressed that the elementary/middle school principal still cares enough about their children to the degree that he would make the time to speak at the high school concert. In the big picture, these types of “principal exchange” activities reinforce the idea that the accepted, standard procedure is for students to continue in music throughout their school years.

Additional ideas that could be implemented might also include the following.

13. The high school students will come up with an idea for a comprehensive video about their program to be posted on the department’s website. The goal is to “tell the story” about their program in a way that is appealing to fellow students.

14. The beginning band teachers will begin using ***First Performance for Band/Orchestra Demonstration Concert*** in the first six or seven weeks of the first year of study for the beginning instrumental students. This mini-concert will close with a high-spirited performance from the high school ensemble. The school principal will be invited to read the provided narrations. More information on how to order a copy is available at www.musicachievementcouncil.org or through your local music dealer.

15. Appropriately selected high school students will provide lessons to beginner/intermediate, elementary/middle school students at a Summer Music Camp to be held at the high school during the first week (or two) after the close of school. This will pair younger students with older students in a supervised setting which could motivate the younger musicians to practice over the summer. It also provides another opportunity for the high school students to serve as role models. In addition, this experience could enlighten the high school students to the possibility of becoming a music educator.

So much was accomplished in that one day! The *team* capitalized on the model from the business world of identifying what it was that they, as one, ***unified*** organization, agreed was their true Mission. We even spoke about adding a “tag line” or creating a slogan to take their essence a step further. Based upon their self-identified goal, some possible tag

lines could include, “Creating a more fulfilling future for our students” or “Creating harmony in our community.”



When the Las Vegas Convention and Visitor’s Authority created the slogan, “What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas,” they created a masterpiece! Everyone knows it and in fact, all one has to say is, “What happens in Vegas. . .” and the answer pops right into your head. So, how can an example like this be used as a slogan for our music departments? One might consider, “What happens in music. . . lasts for a lifetime.”

There is still a long way to go, but this exceptional music education *team* in *the School District of Pickens County* is showing incredible dedication and fortitude in moving forward with their message—to improve the quality of the lives of the students and the community. They have already had a second professional development day to continue working on their plan. It will take a great deal of endurance, determination and even courage over the long term, but the outcome of this game plan are already starting to have a considerable impact. The team photo shown below speaks volumes!!! **GO TEAM!**

