



the band director's guide to
student retention

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Your retention program should begin the instant a beginning band student first walks into your room. To keep them engaged your program has to be rewarding and fun.

We've asked top directors across the country how they keep students excited about their programs. In this ebook you'll learn the techniques and activities used to sustain the leading programs in the country.



the S.M.A.R.T. approach to music ensemble student retention

Once students are in your program, it's vital that you retain them. Retention starts with our very beginning-level students and it is vital that we focus on keeping them once they have started in the program.

There are five pillars to effective retention and I offer an acronym to help remember them by. I call this the S.M.A.R.T. approach to student retention. These aren't the actual activities you'll plan as part of your retention tactics (we will look at those in the next article), these are the underlying strategies to guide all of your retention efforts.

S = Success

Today's young people have so many challenges; the most important thing we can do is to provide our students with successful experiences. They want to feel good about their efforts and what is being accomplished. One place where they can really feel good about themselves is in our music rooms, so keep success in mind as you plan your recruitment projects.

M = Modeling

Modeling is another approach to keep in mind. Let me explain what I mean.

When I was in elementary school – and even more so when I was in junior high school – I could not wait to meet kids who were older than I was. When older students acknowledged me in some way, it was a big deal simply because they were older!

We need to remember and key-in on this. Most younger kids want to be liked and acknowledged by older students, so find opportunities for high schoolers to inspire – and model success for – their younger peers. This can be extremely powerful and something most directors don't use to full advantage.

What's more, when we ask high school students – or even our older band students in the same building – to participate in some kind of a modeling activity, they really enjoy it! Many students welcome an opportunity to develop their leadership skills through positive modeling.

A = Activities

Of course, one of the most important approaches to the recruitment of beginners is ensuring that these youngest musicians are actively involved in music-making. Consider scheduling their first concert as early as the sixth or seventh week of school. A performance early on ensures that they will experience success performing music in public in front of an excited and supportive audience of family members. Remember, the point of an early "informance" is to show how much has been learned in a short amount of time as well as generate enthusiasm for performing on the part of the students. Plan to give your beginners successful opportunities to play as early as possible.

R = Reflection

Another approach that is often neglected is reflection. It is important to use reflection to encourage students to think more often about what making music means to them:

"Being in choir has become like being in a family."

"The band room is the one place in school where I feel like I can be myself."

We need to prompt them to say what being in an ensemble means to them, and to share their insights not only with students who may wish to join in the future, but also with our current students. Sometimes it helps to be reminded how music-making is making a difference in our lives, because it does.



T = The Total Picture

Keep in mind that students want to be involved. Not only do they want to be a part of the music-making, they also want to be a part of the school. They want to be engaged, they want to be recognized for what they're doing, and this is all related to the total picture of what your music program brings to the life of each student.

As you review all of your retention ideas and begin to implement your plans, keep the S.M.A.R.T. approach to retention in mind. They will help make your retention activities even more effective.



With 36 years' experience in music education, Marcia Neel has directed successful secondary music programs in four states. She is an acclaimed author and conference presenter, and is president of [Music Education Consultants, Inc.](#) She also serves as education advisor to the [Music Achievement Council](#), was named senior director of education for the Band and Orchestral Division of [Yamaha Corporation of America](#), and recently accepted a position on the Board of Directors of the Percussive Arts Society.

Read Marcia's articles and full bio on the [SmartMusic blog](#).

5 no-fail beginning band retention activities

Nothing is more important to the success of our music programs than retaining the students who are already enrolled – particularly the beginners. We have to teach the beginners as if they have a scheduled performance at Carnegie Hall. In my previous article, I shared the S.M.A.R.T. approach to retention – i.e. the five pillars which should be considered when focusing on retention which should be ongoing throughout the year. Today, I will share specific examples of events that keep our beginners motivated to continue their music-making experiences as well as to inspire others to join in on the fun.

1. Success through the Partnership Halftime Show

Imagine high school marching band students standing in a semicircle on the football field. In one of the end zones, just under the goal post, beginning band students from the feeder middle/elementary school are lined up in uniform. You can sense the anticipation in the air.

As the name of each beginner is announced to encouraging applause, that student runs onto the field with their instrument, stopping in front of their mentor, a high school band student who plays the same instrument.

In short order, everyone is in position and ready to perform. Special parts have been written for the beginners that utilize just two notes while the high school students accompany them. Check out the young students at the beginning of [this video](#). They're dancing on the field and bumping elbows with the big kids. They're acting crazy and having a great time. Then, when their time comes to play, they shine!

After the performance, you'd expect their families to go wild, and they do! What's more, the whole place goes wild with standing ovations all around.

Imagine having an experience like this in your first year of band. You'd be hooked for life – and that's exactly the point!

Prior to the beginning of the game, a pre-game pizza party could be hosted by the high school band parents so that the high school and beginning band students could mingle and get to know each other even better. The high school parents could also invite the parents of the beginners to meet and greet them and answer questions about being in the program.

Additional Partnership Halftime Show Components

Obviously the key to success here is in creating a situation where every beginning student (and their parent) experiences success; that's part of the brilliance of writing good parts that contain just two or three notes.

Success starts with collaboration. The high school and middle/elementary school band directors must work together to iron out the details of who goes where and how the beginners can easily find their mentor high school student once they take the field. (Of course, it's really the job of the high school student to ensure that their younger peer ends up in the proper location.)

One other idea would be to end the halftime performance with the announcer acknowledging the beginning band parents: with "I'd like to ask that the parents of these future high school band musicians to stand. Please join me in congratulating them on a wonderful first halftime performance!"

It's important for parents, as well as students, to see the goal line for the instrumental music program. It starts early and doesn't end even after high school graduation. Parents should be led to understand that the joy of



music-making can continue for a lifetime. Making this fun and exciting for the parents, as well as the kids, can't hurt. Success and recognition are great motivators.

2. Modeling Through Student-to-Student Communication

In my approach to retention, I emphasize the importance of modeling. The above halftime show is one example of good modeling. Another was shared with me by a high school director in Georgia. His students write cards/notes to the beginning (and sometimes intermediate) students, focusing on their recent accomplishments.

For example, you might have a high school trumpet student write something like, "Congratulations on your performance at last week's band concert," or, "I heard you play at festival last week and you did a terrific job!" to a middle school band student who also plays trumpet. This can help inspire the younger students and keep their excitement level high. They get constant reinforcement

when participating in sporting activities and this particular activity helps to provide the same for our music students.

Involve as many high school students as you can and try to send out the cards/notes via USPS to make it extra special for the young recipients (who likely don't get a lot of mail). Work with the appropriate band directors to gain access to the students' snail mail addresses. Check with your principals to be sure that there are no privacy issues with doing this and if so, simply give the cards to the directors to disseminate to the students. It's important that there is two-way communication among the directors to make this work.

As the younger students do something extra special (like performing at solo & ensemble festival) the word needs to get passed along so that the student can be recognized. When a student is signing up or trying out for the high school band, make sure a card/note is sent along saying something like, "Looking forward to having you join us in the band program next year."

You might think that the high school students are too busy to take on this task but experience shows that the high school kids enjoy it. They come to realize that they are taking on the responsibility of retaining all of those beginning band students and it really works. It's very exciting for them to know that through this type of nurturing leadership activity, they are leaving a legacy that will last for years to come.

The focus is to open communications between those students who have left the middle/elementary program and those who are just beginning. Maybe the older students could also play a role in a series of Saturday morning coaching sessions or a music camp for beginning players held for a week over the summer to get the beginners started on their instrument even before the school year begins.

The key is to promote regular, direct student-to-student communications. The younger students idolize their older peers and want to be just like them so demonstrating desired behavior through quality modeling activities like these is a great way to get them connected in a meaningful way. You'd be surprised how many of these young students can't wait to get to high school so that they can become mentors to other beginners.

3. Activity-based Retention: Participating in the *First Performance National Day of Celebration*

The strategies provided in this post are primarily activity-based which is what contributes to their success, but this particular event is celebrated early each year to get the ball rolling.

The *First Performance National Day of Celebration* is a day that has been set aside to recognize the achievements of beginning instrumental music students. It is celebrated through the presentation of a demonstration concert that allows these young musicians to showcase their newly-acquired musical skills for the very first time in a successful public setting.

This scripted event provides parents with the opportunity to hear their child's progress in a fun and entertaining setting that requires little or no extra work for the teacher as all materials are complimentary and available to download at musicachievementcouncil.org. The ultimate goal is to reduce beginner dropouts, encourage positive communication with parents, strengthen administrative support for the program, and create a memorable experience

for the students. The sound of applause early in a musician's life can encourage continued growth and eventually lead to a lifetime of music-making. This turn-key program will serve to provide an exciting first step in that musical journey.

Check out this video to get a sense of what the *First Performance National Day of Celebration* is all about and to hear the responses from both kids and parents about this innovative program.



Directors love the comment from the gleeful mother who said, "Yeah, they held the first note for four counts and we all applauded." We have to remember what a big deal this is for the students as well as the parents. That comment really does say it all!

The Music Achievement Council (MAC) – an action-oriented 501(c)(6) nonprofit organization – has as its sole mission, "to enable more students to begin and remain in instrumental music programs through the sharing of real-world, successful strategies developed by instrumental music teachers." To that end, they're making this program available to all music educators, free-of-charge.

When the original *First Performance* was first introduced many years ago by the legendary Sandy Feldstein, the world didn't have the plethora of band and orchestral method books that now exist. The package MAC is sharing today includes everything but Dr. Feldstein's music, for which all directors (including choir directors) can substitute their own music. For those interested, Dr. Feldstein's music is made available for purchase through Hal Leonard.

The complimentary materials available to download directly from the MAC website include the following.

1. *Dear Director Letter* which explains the program and provides ideas for implementation.
2. *Dear Principal Letter* which explains the program but also serves as an invitation to the principal to serve as host for the concert.
3. *Dear Parent Letter* which explains the program and serves as an invitation to bring the entire extended family to attend and support their budding musician.
4. *First Performance Script* which is a fill-in-the-blank guide to help provide your host (the principal, in many cases) with appropriate data and introductory remarks for the short 15-20 minute program. (The script is intended only as a guide. It is recommended that directors make it their own. Many comic moments can be shared which only add to the fun of the experience.)
5. *Ideas to Enhance the Performance by Involving High School Students* provides a number of ideas for involving the high school music students which demonstrates the long view of the district's music education program. This frames the understanding that once started, music-making lasts throughout high school and, hopefully, beyond. This also reinforces the modeling approach to retention.
6. Fillable PDF *Certificate of Advancement* that can be completed and printed out for each beginner signifying that the student has now "advanced" from beginning participant to full-fledged member of the band, orchestra, or choir program. These certificates could be presented "on stage" or at a brief reception in the music room immediately following the performance.

Items 2, 3, and 4 above are provided online in .docx format so that they may be customized with your school logo and contact information.

One band director from Connecticut suggested a great finale for the First Performance. Have the high school band come roaring down the aisles in full uniform playing the high school fight song right before or immediately after the final selection. This will create additional excitement and enthusiasm, particularly in the young students who will identify with the older students and want to do the same thing one day for other beginners.

Again, all the materials above – and other extremely helpful complimentary recruitment and retention resources – are available to download at no charge from the [Music Achievement Council website](#).

4. Reflection— Why Do Kids Stay in the Program? Let's Ask Them.

Let's talk about reflection. Let's talk about encouraging students to think about what music-making means to them. During the course of the year, provide a hand-out to your students with the following sentence stem repeated five times.

"Music makes a difference because..."

Ask your students to complete the sentences with as many answers as they would like and to feel free to respond anonymously. You will discover the most incredible responses, especially with younger students when they are still so honest about their feelings. There are many uses for these responses. They can be read aloud back to the class. They can be included as quotes in your school's quarterly parent newsletter or on your school's website. They can even be posted in the classroom to remind the students of the impact of music-making.

But the most important thing is that the students start reflecting about what music means to them in their personal lives and how they feel when they're in the rehearsal room making music as opposed to when they're not.

Some of the themes I hear from music students include:

...it's brought me new friends ...I experience joy when making music ...it's fun ...it gives me a sense of unified purpose

While kids may not use the words "unified purpose," they will make that point. They value being part of a team, they value achieving success alongside others. So that's a really, really good one. When you receive comments like this, it's important to share them as other students will readily agree although they may not have had that thought initially.

Here's a fun example of students sharing their reasons for staying in the band program. The following video is from a high school in Florida. This is not a serious video. The students created it for fun, and I think it's great. This could be done at the high school level and shared with your the beginning students. They'll get the point!

Here are the *13 Reasons Why You Should Stay In Band*

I just love this video! We didn't hear the kids say things like, "Well, I learned to play a Neapolitan 6th chord" or comments like that. It was all about non-musical reasons for staying in band which also contribute to the overall enjoyable experience of creating something of beauty through hard work, tenacity and collaboration.

This next video was made by one of the Foothill High School band students from the Clark County School District located in Henderson, NV. This is another example of students telling their own story.

What I love about this video is that it is the students telling their own story; they decided what they wanted to "say" in the video below, they wrote what you hear, and a video-savvy parent was kind enough to put it all together.



These band students are just amazing. Their video gives me goosebumps every single time because their message is so heartfelt. You just know that they understand the profound value of an education in music. No matter how it's provided, it's important to give students the opportunity to reflect on the significance of the experiences that come as a direct result of collaborative music-making.

5. The Total Picture: Teaching the Parents Too – They Don't Know What Normal Is

Yes, teaching beginners also means that we have to teach their parents as well. It's easy to forget what we need to share with them to ensure that they are involved in the learning process but getting them on board as active learners side-by-side with their children is key. Everyone has their part to play.

Engaging parents can begin with something as easy as teaching them how to support their child's practicing. Be sure they understand that their child needs to have a regular place at home to practice each day that will remain uninterrupted. It must be well-lighted, have a straight-back chair to promote good posture, and a music stand. Students should always have a pencil with eraser handy. We need to suggest that parents help students adhere to a daily practice schedule, including a specific time of day as well as recommended length of practice.

Also, mom and dad should make the time to sit down and listen to their child practice once each week or so then provide encouraging feedback. When my nephew was starting to play trumpet, I'd receive smartphone videos of his playing and would always send back notes like, "Oh, wow! That note sounded so good and you held it out for so long," to provide positive feedback. This helped him to realize (reflect upon) the fact that he was indeed progressing. I also encourage families to video student practice sessions and send them to distant family members. This always adds to everyone's level of enthusiasm and helps the student realize the significance that others also place on his/her musical achievements.

Experience Live Music

Another idea is to provide parents with ideas of how to keep their child motivated. Publish an ongoing list of free performances (like touring string quartets or wind and brass quintets funded by local arts agencies) that may be coming to the local public library. There are more of these performances than parents (and you) might realize and they are often free and of very high quality. Encourage parents to have their beginners sit in the front row then take them to meet the performers after the concert to ask questions. More than likely, the performers started playing their instruments at right about the same age and will be thrilled to share their experiences as young musicians.

I'm not sure that we do enough of this type of high-quality listening and therefore, our students are only hearing the same sounds produced by their

contemporaries repeatedly each day and not hearing live music produced at an exceptionally high level.

The Parent Band

A fun way to encourage parents to play an active role in the learning process is to have them learn to play too. At the beginning of the year when the students receive their instruments for the first time, tell them that part of their overall assignment for the entire year is for them to teach one of their parents how to play their instrument. Their charge is thus to teach mom how to play clarinet, or dad how to play the flute, or the sax, or what have you.

Then, at the spring concert, the parents take the stage and perform as a parent band. They will learn what normal has become for their children because they're doing it themselves. On the flip side, just think about how much your beginning students are learning in the process of teaching one of their parents how to play their own instrument! It's a win-win situation and the performance of the parent band is always a hoot! They get dressed up – just like the kids. And even get nervous – just like the kids!

[Check out this video.](#) The students have handed over their instruments to their parents and are now literally standing right next to them as the moms and dads perform their selections from the method book. (Pay close attention to the girl in the center whose father is struggling to play her saxophone. Her expressions are just priceless.)

You can tell that her dad didn't get a lot of practice time and that she was trying to be as supportive as she could. This entertaining, supportive activity ensures parents will walk away with a better understanding of what is involved when their child is learning to play an instrument.

So now you have an idea of how much fun this can be. You won't get every parent but perhaps those students whose parents can't participate could choose an older sibling or an aunt or even another teacher from the school to teach.

Just remember, parents need to be taught too! They need to know what their beginners are going through and become active in the learning process. It is our job however, to share this information with parents and not assume that this is something that they already know.

Your Enthusiasm

Kids are just amazing! We have the ability, the duty really, to “flip the switch” that can set the course of their lives on the path to a more fulfilled life. So please also remember this final thought... your enthusiasm matters! We have to be enthusiastic about all that we do so that our efforts come together to keep our students involved.

We want them to be music-makers. We want them to begin their adult lives with these experiences, to know how to build relationships and collaborate to build great things; all those twenty-first-century skills we're always hearing about. We can ensure they get those skills in our music programs but the responsibility ultimately rests with us.



With 36 years' experience in music education, Marcia Neel has directed successful secondary music programs in four states. She is an acclaimed author and conference presenter, and is president of [Music Education Consultants, Inc.](#) She also serves as education advisor to the [Music Achievement Council](#), was named senior director of education for the Band and Orchestral Division of [Yamaha Corporation of America](#), and recently accepted a position on the Board of Directors of the Percussive Arts Society.

Read Marcia's articles and full bio on the [SmartMusic blog](#).

Class Schedule

Name: _____ Address: _____
School: _____ Grade: _____ Phone: _____

| Semester/Quarter | Period | From-To | Subject | Room# | Instructor | Days |
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tips for student retention

Like you, Elisa Jones is a music educator who is concerned with retention. She is also the host of the Music Ed Mentor Podcast. She recently interviewed Scott Lang, founder of [Be Part of the Music](#), about how we can keep students coming back year after year.

While you'll likely want to hear [the entire podcast](#), here are a few highlights, starting with Scott's handy retention checklist.

1. Remember it's a campaign, not a single event

- Involve students in more than one way
- Have your current students get involved

2. Recruit your own kids first

- Conduct surveys and value the results
- Let survey results guide your actions

3. Recruit every right kid, not every kid

- Emphasize quality over quantity

4. A happy teacher is the best recruiter

- Always be positive

5. You have to recruit the decision maker, too

- Help parents understand the importance (and the commitment)
- Be in touch with parents directly
- Use email, the phone, whatever it takes

6. Listen to your students

- Understand why they stay and give them more of that
- Provide a high-quality program!

7. Provide your students with leadership opportunities

- Help them be self-starters
- Make them feel their own importance

In addition to sharing this checklist, Scott and Elisa conduct a lively discussion. Below are three key takeaways from their conversation.

Three Key Retention Takeaways

"Number one, you want to retain the right students."

It's important that every student have access to music education, but not every student will have the same level of passion for music. You want to retain the students who are passionate about music, who want to be in your class. That doesn't mean that you only want students who will go on to be music majors. Kids join music for all sorts of reasons; they aren't all headed to Julliard. What's important is that you retain the students who want to be there.

"Understand your community."

Communicating the importance of music education – and why students should stay involved with music – gets much easier when you understand your audience. What works for high schoolers won't necessarily work for elementary school parents. What works for a teacher in a rural area – where internet access may be limited – won't work for a teacher in the suburbs. Take your community into account when working on retention (or recruitment).

"Recruit your own kids first."

There are kids in your ensemble that are burned out, unhappy, or struggling. Retaining those students is the best way to make sure that your program stays healthy and enrollment stays high. You have access to those students and can work with them directly, so much of the "recruitment" work has already been done for you.

Retention is a daily and ongoing process which happens in every rehearsal, every communication and every decision for your music program. The director is the one person who can control the most elements in any music program. Students' time, talent and energy is valuable. If you want high levels of student retention, then respecting those resources must be a part of the daily operations of the program.



Elisa Jones is an author, blogger, clinician, and elementary music teacher at a private K-8 Catholic School in Grand Junction, Colorado.

You can read her bio and blog posts (and discover her podcasts) at SmartMusic.com and at the Professional Music Educator blog.



Scott Lang is a music educator, author, and leadership trainer. He is the author of several [GIA publications](#) and many blog posts on his [music educator blog](#) and the [SmartMusic blog](#). Through scottlang.net, he conducts more than 120 workshops annually and is the force behind bepartofthemusic.org, whose focus is to help music educators attract and retain music students.



don't wait until spring to think about retention

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Start with the End in Mind

"When creating rules, policies, calendars, etc. envision your ultimate goal for every student. If you want students to be long-term members, with independent musical growth, then keep that the focus. Do not get tied up in chasing

trophies, creating burdensome schedules or unrealistic practice expectations. The program will never be more important to anyone than it is to you. Furthermore, your priority of the program will not be shared by every family. Decide what are reasonable expectations to meet the program's' goals and be willing to live with the consequences. Many directors will win a battle or two but lose the war when structuring the program.

Quality Materials & Music

We believe that 20% of the students will be "die hard" band kids. These kids will love everything about band almost all of the time. Maybe 10% will be "on the fence" and may only be there because a parent is insisting on it. These kids

will resist or at best tolerate almost everything about band almost all of the time. The remaining 70% will be casually committed. These students like band if it fast paced, social, rewarding and meaningful.

How do we engage all of these students? High quality literature. Selecting your literature should be an ongoing and careful process that evolves as the group develops. The better the quality of music, the more your students will be engaged. Engaged students stay in band.

Communication

Make it easy for students, parents and administrators to find information easily. Update websites and social media often so your band community has a reason to check in with these sites. Frustration in finding information often causes families to give up on a program. It is critical when communicating with families that you work toward solutions to issues or conflicts. Ultimatums end relationships. Is the program there for the student or is the student there for the program? Whatever your answer, that will be at the center of your communication. Keep in mind that reasonable flexibility helps students know that they are important to you and the program.

Consistency

Consistency in daily rehearsal structure, assessment procedures, routines and expectations will give students a sense of security and build a foundation of trust. That trust leads to strong relationships with students and families. A critical area of consistency is in setting a calendar of rehearsals and performances. The earlier this is set and the less it changes, the easier it will be for families to keep their children in your program. Chaos in the program creates chaos for families and is disrespectful of the students' time and home schedule.

We believe that by keeping retention in mind, not just at the end or the beginning of the year, we can better serve both our students and our program.



Rachel Maxwell currently serves as the director of bands at Traugber Jr. High School and as the Jr. High performing arts and band coordinator for the Oswego, IL School Dist. #308.

Read Rachel's other articles and full bio on the [SmartMusic blog](#).



Jessica Shields currently serves as the director of bands at Plank Jr. High School in Oswego, Illinois. Now in her sixth year of teaching, she is a graduate of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in Music Education.

Read her other articles and full bio on the [SmartMusic blog](#).



Of course what happens at home is crucial to retention, too. With SmartMusic your students receive immediate feedback, even when they practice at home. They can also explore and discover new music, reinforcing the love of performing that you instill in the classroom.

If you aren't using the new SmartMusic, [try it free](#) to see how it can become a vital part of your successful retention program.

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