

All-State: Getting Kids Started — How Gimmicks Can Help Your Program

presented by Brian Cole
report compiled by Faith Farr

Brian Cole teaches 5th and 6th grade orchestra at the Robert Asp School in Moorhead. He gave three dynamic and inspiring sessions at the All-State workshop. Here is a summary of the high points as reported by ten of the attendees.

Probably the most important thing I heard in this session was that our job is not about the music — it's about the *kids*. Too often we get tangled up in the end product, the performance. We need to switch our focus to helping all our students have a better image of who they are and that if they dream it, they can achieve it. If the students are more confident about what they can accomplish, the whole group benefits from a more positive experience. (Debra Powers)

Recruitment

Every time you go into the school you are recruiting; any visit or contact with students, formal or informal, is important and should be a positive experience. Even if he is just dropping something off in the office, Brian attempts to connect with kids in the hallway.

Brian begins recruiting student when they are in kindergarten. By the time they reach 5th grade, they have been to a symphony concert and have heard many middle school orchestra concerts. String quartets travel to the elementary schools during the holiday season to perform for students. In 3rd grade, students travel to see the Fargo/Moorhead Symphony. In 4th grade, students hear the 6th grade orchestra perform a pops concert of familiar TV and movie tunes.

Brian does classroom recruiting in the fall so that students who sign up for strings get an immediate response by starting in a week or so. Recruiting in the spring leaves the summertime to lose any excitement generated. During a recruiting session, Brian demonstrates the instruments to one class of students at a time, allowing for more personal

attention than at an assembly. Brian has each student just pluck the open strings while he fingers the notes for Twinkle. He puts a cello on a student's head and has him put his hand near the bridge to feel the vibrations.

Brian generates excitement for orchestra by using a recording of *In the Hall of the Mountain King* with this story line: Peer is in the jungle looking for his mother (pizz strings start slow and accel.); winds are the dragon. He embellishes the story and the kids get into the piece. He of course explains that they won't play this piece for a few years, but this is how awesome orchestra music is.

Team Building

Students are part of a team. Walls have pictures of past orchestras (former teams), which give a sense of history. Student photos with a paragraph describing their interests go on the wall outside the orchestra room.

Each student folder has their name, the school and school motto to help them identify with a team feeling.

Brian also uses pencils with their school name, rulers with the orchestra name, DYPT (did you practice today) bracelets and pez incentives.

Sixth grade students purchase "orchestra jerseys." These are Moorhead's hockey jerseys with the school colors. Students are able to choose which number they would like to have on their jersey; their name also appears on the back. The jerseys are then worn at all of the concerts and performances during 6th grade.

A winter Sliding Party is a fun night of socializing to help the children bond. A field trip to hear the sounds at Orchestra Hall and see Como Zoo is another fun event. One of the most important activities is the summer camp which takes place the week before the teacher workshop at the end of August. Students participate in lessons, theory classes, a recital, sectionals, rehearsals and phy-ed activities. There is also a lock-in. Social events help keep kids involved in orchestra by building lasting rela-

tionships.

Parent Communication

Parent's Night is in September for the beginners / newcomers to see what the program entails. Parents can bring their child's instrument and have a lesson with Cole to learn terminology and basic technique / tone production.

Brian does a newsletter called *Scrolls and Pegs* that goes out to parents several times in the course of the year keeping them informed about upcoming events.

Brian thinks it is very important that the students have something to play for their families on Winter Break, so he makes sure that each student knows *Jingle Bells* by memory.

Playing Position

Brian uses many gimmicks to make his lessons effective and memorable.

He has a bird in his classroom. The kids learn to sit properly in their chairs by his phrase "Belly up to the bird."

Brian carries a hammer around just in case one of his students need his feet nailed to the floor. The reminder phrase is, "Feet Flat on the Floor Forever Fantastic."

He refers to a droopy violin or viola posture as "shooting ants."

A hacky sack on top of the violin will encourage holding the instrument level.

The arm is relaxed like a hose with no kinks in it.

"Fingers Round Curved and Boxy" reminds violinists that their left hand looks like their finger nails are ready to be polished.

"Perfect Posture — the better I look, the better I play" is another catch phrase.

Cellists learn left hand position on a can of Mountain Dew with tapes on it. When they finally have the necessary hand shape, they are allowed to drink their Dew. It is a rite of passage.

Cellists "biff your neighbor" for correct left elbow height.

Practice bow hold on *MacDonalds* straws — they are sturdier than others.

The straw enables students to monitor how much tension they have in their hand.

The Bow Hold Poem reinforces the elements of the hand shape:
The bump touches the hair Cha Cha
The middle 2 hug the frog Cha Cha
The first finger lays down Cha Cha
The pinkie does push-ups Cha Cha

Perform air bowing exercises with empty toilet paper rolls, holding the roll on the shoulder or in front of the belly according to the specific instrument.

Put a miniature marshmallow under the first finger of the bow hand. The first finger should smash or lean into the marshmallow.

Spy Glass — the bow hand is like a pirate's telescope — the fingers should be rounded.

To get a better bow stroke, pretend to wash your instrument arm with your bow arm. Then do the same thing adding a Twinkle rhythm.

Transform a KFC bucket into a KFD (Keep Fingers Down) bucket and sprinkle pretend KFD dust from the bucket onto fingers.

Brian often has his orchestras play in the dark as it helps them listen to their tone.

Assignments

Assignment cards are prepared

ahead for each student to take home. They spell out what students should practice, know, review, learn, memorize, play, sing and fill out at home. They also include a motivational message or inspirational quote.

When students begin, Brian does not let them practice more than 10 minutes at a time. This makes practicing seem manageable. Then, as the year progresses, he informs the students when they are ready to add another 5 minutes.

Each month has a theme: Getting to Know Each Other (Sept), Attitude (Positive Attitude = Success), Practice (if you practice with a friend, it counts double!), Teamwork, Posture, Goal-Setting (in January, each class sets 3 goals they would like to achieve by the end of the year), Concert Etiquette, Musical Terms, Back to the Future (in May, look back on the year, assess progress and plan for summer).

Chamber Music

Brian does chamber music with at least half of the students, not just the top students. His second year (6th grade) students meet every other week on Fridays. He uses "Schwan's" delivery day stickers to help remind students of their next quartet day.

Each group has identical folders.

Groups are roughly ability based. Getting students from the same homeroom is helpful. Consider doing groups somewhat by address to make extra practices and transportation easier.

Every group is asked to give themselves a name. Then Brian makes business cards for them from a template he has created.

First lessons stress ensemble skills of tuning, cueing, sniffing, cut offs and facial expressions. The leading duties are passed around on each different playing.

Easier repertoire is continually improved throughout the year as more difficult selections are added.

Students are encouraged to find gigs. Many of these groups had 5-10 throughout the year with Brian only supervising the most visible and important of these.

Reported by Lynne Bulger (Mendota Heights), Sarah Chelgren (Robbinsdale), Connie Conrad (Robbinsdale), David Conrad (Hopkins), Betsy Jacobson-Holtz (La Crosse, WI), Cynthia Johnson (Winona), Betsy Neil (La Crosse, WI), Debra Powers, Deb Sittko (Moundsview), Sarah Snyder (Naperville, IL). Compiled by Faith Farr, editor. ‡