



ADVOCACY

Passive Recruitment Helps Retention (Part 2)

by Brian Cole

Have you ever given the following a thought: what if every subject in your school was an elective (like orchestra) and each fall the teachers in your school would present a 5-minute talk on why students should sign up for their class. Hum? As orchestra and music teachers in general, that is what we do every year. If students don't sign up for our program we won't have an orchestra... let alone a job. The day-to-day operations of our programs are important, but there are very few attributes that are more crucial than getting students into our classroom. Recruitment is where it all starts.

Passive Recruiting (As opposed to active recruiting i.e. inviting the students to be a part of your class)

Effective recruiting occurs multiple times throughout the year. Here are a few ways that will keep your school orchestra visible and in turn help both recruitment and retention.

- 1) The best recruiting is word of mouth. Without placing too much stress on any of us, every time we speak to a parent, every time we give a concert, every time we send a note home, every time we answer an email, we are recruiting.
- 2) Think of nontraditional places to give your concerts. We moved into a new building a few years ago and there is a door that goes right from our orchestra room unto the stage. It is very easy for us to give a concert on our "home" stage, though it does not get us out into the community; therefore, we try to find other places around town to give concerts. Try doing a few of these: playing the national anthem for your local sports

teams, marching/strolling in your town's homecoming parade, offering to present a small program at a Rotary Club meeting, giving an all-city concert with all of your district's orchestra students on the high school gym floor, performing during the Christmas season on a radio station's slot for local school talent, etc. By performing at local events your school orchestra becomes a part of your community's identity.

- 3) Be a visible part of the schools you teach in. I always remember hearing Bob Gillespie say, "Every time you step foot in a school you are recruiting." Yikes! But it is the truth. Make conscious choices about what door you enter; do you sneak in the janitor door or do you enter through the main door? Try to walk through the cafeteria a few times a week eating your apple and stopping at tables to say hi. My colleague Doug Neill has made the choice this year to spend each morning before school in the main hallway helping with crowd control. Not only does this help the school day start more smoothly but it also makes him a more visible part of the school. Try to find a few times a year to attend after school sporting events that some of your students are involved with. I still recall how my elementary gym teacher used to give high five's to us as we left school on Fridays; what a great way to end the school week.
- 4) Make a point to send notes home about student's progress. We had card stock post cards made up with our logo on one side and the other

side blank. At the beginning of the year I make up mailing labels for every orchestra student that I have. And then throughout the school year I will find something good to say about that student and send it home. Being careful that the notes contain genuine praise, I have found that these post cards have opened up some great dialogue with parents and students about such things as: private lessons, career aspirations, grading requirements, etc. My colleague Doug Neill and I have 470 fifth through eighth grade orchestra students and these notes give us a tangible way to let the parents know that we value each individual student and the contribution they are making to the orchestra.

- 5) Most importantly remember that each student is an individual. Know their names, know their hobbies, know their activities, give them a nickname! The most beautiful sound to any student is hearing their name called. We like to make folder labels on the computer with a fancy font and our logo as opposed to writing it out by hand. This gives the student a sense of belonging—that we really want them here. We do the same with seating charts and cubby assignments.

Brian Cole teaches 5th and 6th grade orchestra at Robert Asp School in Moorhead. His ensembles have performed at the MNSOTA Middle Level Orchestra Festival Tier 2, the MMEA Convention, the Midwest Band and Orchestra Clinic, and at the national ASTA Convention. Brian received MNSOTA's Master Teacher: School Orchestra Award in 2002. ‡