

# All-State: So... Now What? Recovering from a Difficult Year and Advocating for Our Programs in the Wake of a Pandemic

presented by Wendy Barden — reported by Aurora MacMillan

Wendy Barden's session helped us look at the losses our programs have taken during the COVID pandemic this past year, and also look forward to building them back up using familiar tools and skills. She walked us through how to think about each angle of building a program up, and encouraged us to use our current recruitment and retention strategies as well as try some new ones. She shared thoughts from a winter panel on recruiting, retaining and revitalizing, and led us through some discussions and gallery walks to share ideas with each other. The following are some takeaways from her session.

It can be useful to track the data of our recruitment and retention. Barden encouraged us to track the numbers of students in our programs from year to year, on a spreadsheet that lasts from the beginning instrument year through 12<sup>th</sup> grade: per class, per instrument or per student; or in a more narrative format. She suggested that it's valuable to track percentages of retention from the previous year, but also other individual factors per student, such as instrument ownership and functionality, solos played, honors orchestras or community performances. She also pointed us to the NAFME Local Advocacy plan as a resource for planning and documenting advocacy efforts.

Engagement is important on every level for program-building, with students, families, coworkers, administrators and our surrounding communities. However, this may look different depending on the audience. Our first job is of course to build relationships and create a successful learning environment for our students. Barden presented the following as a plan for how to kickstart this engagement by presenting this outline for a plan for this year:

1. Do a good job.
2. Do a good job.
3. Do a good job.
4. Tell everyone about it!

When we engage with adults outside of our classroom, it may be enough to be able to tell them about what is happening in our classes, but we may need additional resources. Below are some places we can look for more information to have on hand while talking with administrators or com-

munity members:

- MDE Minnesota Current Arts Education Requirements
- NAFME Opportunity to Learn Standards
- NAFME ESSER Funding Toolkit 2021 - COVID Relief Funding in the Music Classroom
- NAFME Local Advocacy Action Plan

To do our job well and engage students, we considered the following as guiding questions for the year. There were many answers per question, some of which I've included below:

## How do we aid retention by making learning relevant to the students?

- Evolve our programs and involve the students in ways that will hopefully contribute to their engagement in our ensembles. This year will not magically spring right back to pre-pandemic times and it's OK for it to look different.
- Create a welcoming space for kids to return to school.
- Remember that student voice and choice matters—for music, activities, pacing, audiences, etc. The more they can connect, the more they will feel connected.

## What did we do during the pandemic that we'd like to continue on into future years?

- Teach more creating and arranging—a great tool to take away from last year.
- Allow student choice in solo repertoire—this was hugely helpful during the pandemic.
- Consider questioning which parts of our pre-pandemic routines (concerts/contests/etc.) were the most valuable? We don't need to get back to everything right away if it wasn't helping students.
- More use of online tools that help with accessibility.

## How are we working to retain students into the next year (staying in our programs instead of choosing other electives)?

*This was the biggest discussion topic in this*

*session!*

- Prepare your responses for quitting excuses you hear frequently, and be ready to respond to them both reactively and proactively. For example, if you're hearing a lot of "I don't like the music" it might be a good chance to engage the student in talking about their favorite kinds of music, or adding a song they like to the suggestion box. This can be done year-round.
- Build connection across sections, across orchestras, and across the whole program. Mentorship programs in the orchestra can build relationships from year to year.

## How are we going to rebuild our program this fall?

- Let go of some of our "what \_\_\_ ensemble should sound like at this point" expectations when they haven't been an ensemble for a while.
- Play a lot and find the joy in a musical ensemble again!
- Creating multiple entry points can help build a program's numbers up.
- Have visual team elements such as t-shirts or stickers.
- Have fun with the social element as much as is allowed by current local COVID protocols.

## How can we motivate beginner and middle school students to engage?

- Celebrate all successes! Share those successes out with families and community!
- Allow for more independent student choice of repertoire "just for fun."
- Send "musical postcards"—mini recordings—to families and admin.

## How are we working with administrators to ensure support for our programs?

- Focus on SEL and make that visible.
- Invite admin to your events! Even the small ones!
- Show that students still enjoy being in their music ensembles!
- Be proactive and show admin that we are experts in our field, by showing up with a good understanding of the new arts standards and some thought-

ful points about how to implement MDE/MDH guidance.

### **How are we working as a music department to “Build Back Better”?**

- Work cohesively as a department to maintain a vision, promote, recruit and celebrate.
- Do collaborative musical events as allowed to widen/broaden the audience that gets to hear each group.
- Check out the GRAMMY in the Schools program.
- Use our best SEL skills with each other as well as with our kids.

### **What could the instrument selection process look like for next year?**

- Use digital tools such as *Be Part of the Music*.
- Try a look-but-don't-touch instrument demo night.
- Make videos with teachers from the school—including teachers who don't teach music. One suggestion was to have adults from around the school

say what instrument they played or that they sang in choir. This could be in video format or posted on classroom doors.

### **Are we using the best materials for our students, our scope and sequence?**

- Think about your kids and their interests, and your schedule and ability to reach students. It's OK to pivot and use this as a time to prune what we used to do down to the absolute essentials to make room for more connection with students and their interests.

This session took a realistic but positive approach to coming back to school this year. Things are different, and maybe some things should or will stay different. This doesn't mean we can't keep making music with kids, and still work on the success of our programs. It does mean that we will need to use all of our engagement and advocacy skills every day this year to keep our programs alive and flourishing. Our priority necessarily is to make the orchestra class-

room a wonderful place for our students. Wendy Barden reminded us that advocacy is a marathon, not a sprint. We can reach out to our peers and colleagues for more tools and resources, and grow our skills to do this.

*Wendy Barden, PhD, is Minnesota's Music Education Specialist. Currently, a major part of her work centers around implementation of the 2018 Minnesota Academic Standards in Music. Perpich Center's Music Education Specialist serves the work of Minnesota music educators and administrators through dynamic face-to-face and online workshops, consultation, and professional development customized to school or district needs. You can expect a rigorous, yet pragmatic, approach to your questions and requests. More info at <https://perpich.mn.gov/professional-development/state-arts-education-specialists/music-education-specialist>.*

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