



The Way Forward: Collaboration

I'm a band director. My best buddy is an orchestra director. But we came to this friendship as colleagues and collaborators. Sure, collaboration is easy to do when you are good friends, but it is also possible, and perhaps even more important, when you aren't.

How we did it at Washington Middle School (the nitty gritty):

In the fall of 2008, when I started at WMS, Beth Fortune approached me with a quandary. "The band and orchestra programs are totally separate, and it seems really odd." Hmm... It is a reality that music educators are used to. Either you are the only music teacher, or you are, as were we, pillars of separate programs. Right next door, but separate.

We weren't sure what to do, but agreed it was a problem that we would like to solve over time. A crazy idea developed. What if, instead of running traditional full orchestra on Fridays, we put the entire concert band and string orchestra together? Beth had a full orchestra piece with saxes, and we used it. The kids seemed to enjoy the process, and I really loved that I didn't have to pick one flute out of my army of flutes to be in full orchestra; they all got the experience.

And then it was concert time. We kind of freaked out! Are the parents going to think that we are nuts? Nope. The concert was epic. Each group played its own repertoire and then, for the finale, played our combined piece. The audience LOVED it, and a tradition was born.

For eight years we combined ALL our ensembles, by level, at each concert. And I'll tell you what, team-teaching most Fridays is THE BEST.

Set the tone (a sales pitch of sorts):

- If the "orch dorks" and "band nerds" play music together, they are all

musicians of equal standing. How awesome is that?

- The band students will be more well-rounded and creative if they must "make it work" with the string kids. Dynamic adjustments, sharing repertoire, playing in string-friendly keys.
- Parents eat it up! Seriously. And we all know how important that is.
- If things are feeling stale, mixing it up between programs livens up everything for the kids and for the teachers.

Logistics (making it work): These ideas assume that you have parallel schedules. If you don't, get creative!

Beginning Band with Beginning Orchestra:

- Teach the band to play the open string cycle. Warm up together.
- We have a tradition of playing "Boil Them Cabbages Down." It is in the band book and in the string book, in different keys, so we play it back to back and have them all sing together.

Intermediate Band with Intermediate Orchestra:

- Purchase a FlexScore for non-traditional ensembles.
- We use a Bach chorale book and find it to be most excellent.

Junior Band with Junior Orchestra:

- We get into some serious full orchestra rep.
- The string parts are usually tougher on these, so keep the band kids engaged by putting them on the piece too. It is in a string-friendly key, so the band kids will be challenged. Have the band guy teach the Eb saxes to play a bassoon part (they just transpose the key and pretend it is treble clef).

Senior Band and Senior Orchestra:

- Start putting the strings on concert band music. Toss the violins an oboe part! Sousa, sure!

AND THE REASON YOU HAVE ALL TUNED IN

Jazz Band and Eclectic Strings:

- Our Eclectic String group started as an after-school ensemble. But after a year, we were able to show student/parent buy-in. Moving the class to being held during the day, just like the jazz band, was simply a matter of equity.

- Share the rhythm section. Sure, it's kind of annoying sometimes to be without your drummer, but that kid will come back to jazz band a different player the next day. Nuanced.

- Ask the band guy if there are any big band charts with a flute or guitar part that they have been avoiding. If so (and I betcha there are), toss that flute part at the violins!

- Standards, standards, standards. Teach some heads and get everyone soloing. We have a monthly jam session where the kids team up in mixed combos.

- And once things are established, take your string group to all the jazz festivals with the jazz band! Man, we have fun.

Give it a try! Pretty please? Just one song for one concert and see how it goes. I think you and your program will be forever changed for the better.