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Music Education in Rural Areas: A Few Keys to Success

By Daniel Isbell

Community dynamics play a major role in determining the duties of music educators.¹ What music educators do each day can vary greatly depending on their location. A middle school band director's job description in suburban New York is likely to look nothing like that of a music educator in rural Iowa.

The typical rural music teacher is just that, a *music teacher*. These teachers are often required to teach many areas of music, not just band, choir, or orchestra. Rural music teachers may also have other responsibilities that are unrelated to music. After teaching a variety of music classes each day, they can often be seen driving school buses, coaching sports teams, or advising student clubs.

Rural music educators may also be required to travel among several schools and teach a wide range of grade levels, which often means teaching the same students year after year. There is nothing as rewarding as watching a senior graduate whom you can remember starting out on the clarinet several years earlier. The opportunity to get to know students over many years, coupled with the often quiet and scenic surroundings, can make a rural community a special place to guide and influence the lives of students.

There is a substantial lack of literature to help teachers who choose to work in rural schools. This is surprising, since two-thirds of all public schools in this country are, by some definitions, considered rural and are responsible for educating one-quarter to one-third of all school-age children.²

Insufficient resources, geographic isolation from other music teachers, and other specific challenges of a rural setting can overwhelm even the most experienced music teacher. Low enrollment can place strains on the performance abilities of instrumental and choral groups and force rural teachers to be creative with instrumentation, repertoire choices, and scheduling conflicts. The problem of low enrollment is often exacerbated by frequent teacher turnover, which typically results in students leaving the program.³

Instruments are often in disrepair, and there are no funds to fix them. Performance spaces and rehearsal facilities, if they exist, may be inadequate or out-of-date.⁴

While the above conditions certainly do not apply to all rural locations, they are common. The presence of one or more of these situations requires a music teacher with immense talents and creativity, not to mention a strong sense of humor. Rather than lamenting these difficult conditions, effective rural music teachers find ways to make small-town life work in their favor.

Overcoming Low Enrollment

Combining Groups. The first challenge facing many rural music teachers will probably be low enrollment. They may wonder how they can possibly put on a good band concert with only nine students in the high school band. Locating other musicians in the district and combining groups is one solution to this common problem. For example, if there are more middle school students than high school students in a band program, consolidating the two groups can often create a more ideal ensemble. Scheduling issues and geographic separation may prevent a combined music group from being a daily class, so it may be necessary to meet periodically after school. If student conflicts make this difficult, a few rehearsals before the concert may be all that the group requires or can afford.

The rewards of teaching at a small school in a rural community outweigh the challenges if you think creatively and take advantage of the many resources available.

Combining music students of varying ages and experience into one group provides an opportunity for older students to mentor the younger students. Experienced performers can model appropriate tone, phrasing, and articulations quite readily. Trustworthy juniors and seniors can offer private instruction in available practice rooms or offices. Experienced students generally respond well to this added responsibility and appreciate the respect they receive from it. The younger students will also enjoy getting feedback and assistance from someone closer to their own age.

Combining music groups is likely to create a few problems when assigning musical parts, so it may be necessary to encourage students to switch instruments or voice parts. Many students actually look forward to this new challenge. When assigning parts for the band, it's a good idea to have beginning percussionists (of which there are often several) learn an additional instrument. If a score only has a snare or cymbal part, the extra percussionists can provide support in the other sections, such as woodwinds or brass. This will also greatly benefit the percussionists' overall musicianship.

Regardless of whether a music group has an adequate number of students, the selection of appropriate repertoire is always important. After doing some substantial sight-reading at the beginning of the year, the director should select music of high quality in a variety of styles, textures, and difficulty levels. The ensemble should work on several pieces: some that meet the needs of the advanced students and some that can develop confidence in the younger musicians. Inexperienced musicians enjoy working on difficult music occasionally, even if it is a little over their heads.

In turn, older musicians working on easier pieces will be given the opportunity to learn that hitting the right notes or having the correct rhythms under their fingers doesn't necessarily mean that they've "got it." When playing music written for beginners, these more experienced students can focus on

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A rural community can be a very pleasant place to teach music.

Photo by photos.com

Effective Student-Led Rehearsal Tips

Here are a few helpful tips to go over with students who are interested in leading a music rehearsal:

- Work on basic two-, three-, and four-beat conducting patterns.
- Know the music well enough to maintain eye contact with musicians.
- Cue sections and soloists.
- Combine intensive work on small sections with longer run-throughs.
- Separate different elements of music (pitch, rhythm, balance, etc.).

more advanced and abstract concepts, such as phrasing, pitch, and tone. When the older students understand that they are acting as role models and mentors to the younger students, they are likely to become much more willing to work on music that doesn't challenge them technically. If the expectations of the teacher and students continue to rise each year, the advanced repertoire will come as the program develops.

Small Ensembles. Ensembles that are traditionally small are a perfect fit for small rural music programs because they only require a limited number of people to function as they were intended. Chamber groups, drum ensembles, brass quintets, barbershop groups, quartets, duets, and trios all provide students opportunities to explore different genres of music.

For these smaller groups, the director can assume the role of coach, letting the students enjoy the added responsibility of running their own rehearsals. Some students may need instruction on how to run an effective rehearsal. For a few brief guidelines, see the Effective Student-Led Rehearsal Tips.

Students also benefit from the more independent form of musical performance that small music groups provide. The music program need not be limited to standard classical ensembles. Small jazz, rock, and pop ensembles can be just as beneficial and have the added potential to make the school music program more relevant to many students.

Rewriting Music. Even when instrumental and vocal parts have been assigned and small ensembles have been created, the rural music teacher may have to rewrite parts to fit the

groups' abilities and the distribution of instruments and voice parts. Altering the key signature, bringing notes down an octave, simplifying a rhythm, giving euphoniums a trombone melody, or substituting a baritone saxophone for a bassoon are all ways of helping ensure that a performance is musical and pleasing for the audience and the performers. Rewriting parts in this way requires a willingness to experiment, as well as a knowledge of theory and of secondary instruments.

It is of prime importance that rural music teachers keep up with their knowledge of secondary instrument techniques. Private teachers are often nonexistent or very far away from rural communities, so students need a teacher who is capable of modeling an appropriate tone and technique on a variety of instruments. Rural music teachers should keep a resource file containing detailed information on performance and pedagogy for each instrument. It is necessary (and often difficult) to find the practice time needed to keep secondary instrument performance skills at an adequate level.

Traveling. Traveling is an activity that need not be reserved for large programs. Directors from small music programs may think that limited funds or low enrollment in their program limits opportunities for taking trips, but this does not always have to be the case.

Music festivals and competitions have triple benefits for music students: (1) they allow group members to get to know fellow members they normally do not spend time with, (2) they involve a level of performance that motivates many players, and (3) they are opportunities to receive feed-

back from someone other than the director students see every day.

Trips don't have to be of the performance variety to reap large benefits. It's amazing what even the simplest trip will do for the morale of a small music group. Arranging trips to see a guest artist in a big city or to visit a vacation destination on spring break can also bring musicians in a group closer together.

Obviously, fund-raising becomes an issue when planning trips, and rural music teachers need to be willing to add one more thing to their already overflowing plate. One solution is to call on supportive parents to assist with this extra task. Fund-raising can be difficult in rural communities, which may necessitate less expensive, but still memorable, educational trips.

Finding Support

Administration. Research has shown that support from administration is crucial to the success of a music program.⁵ Rural music programs are no exception. Fortunately, one of the benefits of teaching in a rural school is that there is a limited amount of red tape, and administrators are generally more easily accessible than in larger school systems.⁶

It's important that music teachers be seen by the administration as team players and part of the school "family." Having the administration's support is vital in a number of situations, including seeking funding, working with parents, and having a voice in the creation of the school's master schedule. Gaining or keeping the support of administrators may mean attending committee meetings when something else seems more important, arranging performances for pep assemblies when the school's music groups have already agreed to an appropriate number of performances in support of athletics, or participating in schoolwide community cleanup projects and similar school events.

Student Body and Fellow Teachers. It's not necessary to parade around the school extolling the virtues of music education to the student body and the teachers not directly involved with the music program. However, frequent informal performances around the

Rural Music Educators' Checklist

These hints can help you improve your rural music program:

- Combine two or more existing music groups.
- Encourage experienced students to mentor, direct rehearsals, and give private lessons.
- Suggest students try different instruments and vocal parts.
- Form small ensembles to perform traditional and nontraditional music.
- Provide both simple and challenging music pieces.
- Rewrite music to fit the needs of a particular group.
- Arrange trips for your ensembles.
- Ask parents to help with fund-raising, chaperoning, concert duties, and other tasks.
- Foster a good relationship with school administration.
- Encourage music students to give extra performances for the school and community.
- Learn about the school's master schedule and how you can influence its structure and contents.

school may convince others that the music program is more than just a group of kids who occasionally dress up and present evening concerts. School assemblies or the lobby at lunchtime are examples of good places to make appearances. If the band, choir, or smaller "cool" ensembles perform music that is accessible to the general public, then the image of and support for the music program are likely to improve.

Students can organize these kinds of performances themselves, perform popular music, and wear casual attire. They will benefit from more performance opportunities, and the members of the school community will start to understand that there is much more to the music program than they thought.

Parents and Community. Many studies have linked student success with parental support.⁷ These studies often define parental support as encouragement of student practice or attendance at student performances. Parental support increases student motivation and is, without question, very helpful in student learning and development.

Parents can also assist with routine school responsibilities. Many parents offer their time and energy to help music directors, only to be politely turned away because the directors either do not know what duties to assign or may be nervous about having someone else do a job that reflects on them. But when the concert night arrives and there are two or more performing groups on the program, the director will appreciate having someone else handle chairs, lighting, and cleanup. Parents can also chaperone trips and manage fund-raisers. If the director is fortunate enough, parents may also be able to act as private teachers, accompanists, or music coaches.

Change and improvement are much easier if the rural music program has the support of the parents and the community. Community support has been deemed essential in the development of rural music programs.⁸ Small ensembles that perform holiday music, Memorial Day programs, and outdoor concerts in the park will give students valuable experiences and help spread the word that the school music program is thriving. More often than not, the group can use the same

music for multiple programs, reducing the need for added rehearsal time.

The local high school in small towns is very often the hub of activity.⁹ The culture of the community and culture of the high school often blend as one. Pep-band and athletic-event performances are low-cost, high-benefit activities that increase the visibility of the music program. The music certainly adds to the excitement of a game, but the real benefits of performing at athletic events, even with a smaller ensemble, are in establishing the music program as an integral part of the school and community.

Even though outside performances are important public relations activities, it's extremely important for the rural music teacher to make sure there is balance in the program. For example, the pep-band program should not negatively affect the band by taking precious time away from the rehearsal and performance of concert music. The development of student musicianship is always of paramount importance, and pep-band performances can take over a program and stunt musical growth if a teacher is not careful.¹⁰ In addition, because students in rural communities are often involved in many different activities, pep-band commitments and overscheduling have the potential to wear everybody out.

Master Schedule Participation

Because students from smaller schools are more likely to be involved with extracurricular activities than students from larger schools, it may be difficult for a rural music educator to have everyone attend after-school activities.¹¹ While larger schools may offer more choices for after-school activities, students from smaller schools will often make more out of the opportunities that exist for them.¹² Conflicts of all kinds are more likely in rural schools, and an effective rural music teacher needs to be understanding and flexible.

In rural schools, conflicts related to the master schedule of classes are often seen as an inevitable part of teaching.¹³ Small schools, by their very nature, cannot offer many time slots for a particular class. Often there is only one time slot for a required class, and that class may unfortunately meet at the same time as the only section of band or choir. Conflicts in the schedule have the potential to devastate a music group.¹⁴ This is why rural music educators must get involved with the creation of the school's master schedule. At the very least, they should go to great lengths to educate themselves about how master schedules are made and what options are available. It's impossible to improve a music program if the students can't get into the classroom.

Understanding Rural Contexts

Not every rural music teacher has grown up in a rural community. Rural teachers need to be sensitive to the concerns of their communities. This means that work on the farm sometimes takes priority over school. When it's calving season, the family may need extra hands at home. The livelihood of a family could depend on it. A new teacher from the suburbs may have difficulty understanding this rural concept.

In addition to the day-to-day activities that are a part of rural life, the culture of the students needs to be taken into consideration. A first-year teacher should not expect to immediately change the perspectives of students in a rural community. It's important to meet them where they are and gradually introduce them to new musical worlds. The merits of learning multicultural and avant-garde music are certain, but rural students and their families may not be immediately receptive to learning about such topics. They are likely to resist an immediate authoritarian approach, so it's wise to begin by teaching familiar music and then slowly expand the repertoire.

Conclusion

Inevitably, after all of the preparation and careful attention to detail has taken place, teachers will find that some things do not turn out as expected. The Rural Music Educators Checklist provides a list of several ways to improve a rural music program.

It's always important to maintain a sense of humor and remain patient. It not only takes a long time to build a reputable rural music program; it also takes a constant flame of energy to sustain it. A rural music teacher's willingness to take risks and try new approaches in organization and pedagogy, even if those changes seem radical at first, will keep the music program fresh and engaging year after year. Combining this with empathy and respect, while gradually increasing expectations, will help ensure that students in rural communities receive a rich music education.

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10. *Ibid.*; and Isbell, "Factors that Promote and Limit Success."

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MENC Resources

The following articles offer additional information to help rural music educators. Visit <http://www.menc.org/journals> or call 800-828-0229 for more information. Past articles from MENC journals are available in many library periodical databases.

- Davis, Beverly, and Alan Stevens. "A Plan for Success in the Small District." *Music Educators Journal* 80, no. 5 (1994): 19, 42–43.
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