

# Strategies for Rebuilding Your Orchestra Program

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Hannah Smith, Presenter

# Background Info



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- Though I've achieved success at Overland, I'm certainly not an expert on rebuilding programs
- Every situation is different
  - Demographics of school
  - Level of students
  - Support for and culture of program
  - Teaching style, philosophies, and priorities
- This presentation will cover strategies that have worked for me, but is certainly not the only way to go about rebuilding
- I'd love to hear your ideas too!

# Where Do I Start?

- Be realistic, yet set high expectations
- Fundamental Beliefs:
  - Students want to be successful and therefore want to sound good.
  - Once students know you care about them, you can get them to do almost anything. Kids are super loyal to people they care about.

# Doing Your Research

- Get as much information as possible—be persistent
- Talk to anyone you can: other directors, parents (booster group), students, etc.
- Get copies of old programs and old paperwork/resources
- Determine what can and can't (should and shouldn't?) be changed
- “If it ain't broke, don't fix it.” HOWEVER...the less the previous director was liked, the more you can change



# Building Relationships

- The single most important thing I've done to rebuild my program quickly
- Once students know that you care about them as people, they will be eager to please you.
- Make the orchestra classroom feel like home
- Be real with students
- Do fun things with kids outside of class
- Students love when you take interest in their lives and appreciate the things they do besides music
- The more comfortable students are with you and the more they respect you, the easier it will be for you to have intense rehearsals

# Choosing the RIGHT Music

- Another “must do” in order to rebuild a program quickly
- Criteria for choosing music:
  - Appropriate level for your group
  - Challenging enough that the students will learn something, but accessible enough that they will sound polished & put together at the time of performance
  - Something that kids will like
  - Something that YOU like
  - Balanced concert programs and curriculum

# Choosing the RIGHT Music

- Do your homework when choosing music
- Especially as a younger or newer teacher, you need to take time to familiarize yourself with the string orchestra repertoire
- Places to start
  - J.W. Pepper (and similar sites)
  - UIL Prescribed Music List
  - *Teaching Music Through Performance* books
  - Various “tried and true” lists
  - New music reading sessions
  - Ask colleagues for suggestions
- Spend some time listening, studying scores, etc.
- Don't necessarily choose the first thing you come across



# DON'T OVERPROGRAM!!!!

- We've all heard this a million times...BUT SERIOUSLY
- Everybody's guilty of choosing the "wrong" piece
  - Be willing to admit this & go back to the drawing board
- It's MUCH better to choose slightly easier music and focus on perfecting it than it is to just gloss the surface of something harder
  - "No one cares what you're playing unless it sounds good."
  - Even the most advanced students can be challenged with more accessible repertoire
- Middle and high school orchestras very rarely polish their music as much as would be ideal, but it's such a treat when they do!
- It's totally possible to find music that's both accessible and educationally enriching

# Kids Want to Sound Good!

- And they know when they don't...
- Your *most important* job is to make the students sound good
  - While students sometimes complain about intense rehearsals, they actually come to appreciate it in the end
- Choosing the right music is a HUGE part of this
- Be honest with yourself about what your group can and can't play
- We all have "favorite" pieces of music, but we need to be patient when it comes to programming them
  - Find ways to scaffold instruction in the meantime
- Choose music that showcases your group's strengths

# Before the First Rehearsal...

- Put bowings and fingerings in the music BEFORE you pass it out
  - This is a huge time saver during rehearsals
- Play all of the individual instrument parts
  - (On the appropriate instrument)
- Study your scores well
  - This will help facilitate fast-paced rehearsals
  - Develop clear interpretations
  - Consider memorizing

# Rehearsal Techniques

- Have high expectations
- Avoid just playing from the beginning to end of a piece over and over
- Spend some time thinking through exactly what you want to accomplish in each rehearsal
- Perfect at least one section of music every rehearsal
- During the earliest stages of rehearsing a piece, start with loud/exciting sections
  - Students like playing these parts and will be more likely to develop a positive opinion of the music early on

# Rehearsal Techniques

- Be mindful of the language you're using
  - Don't label something as "good" if it isn't. Use "better" instead.
  - Avoid talking too much in general
- Insist on 100% participation
  - Don't be afraid to call out individual students if they're not meeting your expectations
  - Create a supportive classroom culture before you do this
- Establish routines
- Avoid being glued to the podium
- Mix up seating arrangements



# Rehearsal Techniques

- If you want to get a group to sound good right away, focus on:
  - Tone
  - Intonation
  - Technique
  - Musicality
- Approach everything with passion and energy
  - If you're excited about something, your students will be too

# Team Building

- Establish section leaders
  - Consider having section leaders who aren't necessarily first chair
- Do fun things outside of class
  - No rehearsal involved!
- Orchestra camp/retreat
- Get orchestra gear (t-shirts, hoodies, etc.)
- Allow students to help you
  - Find jobs for lots of students & play to non-musical strengths
- Build up team/family mentality
  - Remind students about this *constantly*
  - Consider rotating chair placement at least sometimes
  - Don't allow egos
- Let the students share comments and feedback during rehearsal

# Performing & Exposure

- Perform...A LOT
  - As long as students will be successful, you should any performance opportunity you can
- This can be good PR for your program
  - You never know who will be listening
- Think beyond concerts—get creative!
- Perform at events where “important people” will be watching
- Host events at your school

# Other Considerations

- Rebuilding a program takes time.
- The younger kids are the ones that matter.
- Develop a long-term vision for your program
- Fight for what's important to you
- Collaborate with others in the music department
- Develop a strong feeder program.

# Finding Support

- Find at least one person in your building who you can talk to
- Reach out to other string teachers in the district, state, country, etc.
- Rely on friends and family
- Students and families in your program can also help
- Learn to delegate
- Insist that your focus be on teaching music
- It's easy to feel alone...but you're not :)



# Teaching in a Low-Income Area

- Some considerations:
  - Students have less access to financial resources
    - Many students will need to use school instruments
    - Fees have to be dramatically less than they might at another school
    - Most students cannot afford private lessons
  - Students may have less-than-adequate support at home
  - Transportation is an issue for a lot of students
  - Many students live in apartments or other situations where it is difficult to practice at home

# What Can You Do to Help?

- Make yourself available
  - Help students outside of class (private lessons, sectionals, etc.)
  - Come early and stay late
  - Allow students to do all of their practicing at school
- Form relationships with students
  - Be willing to wear a lot of different “hats”
- Understand that you will have to work twice as hard
- Be real with your students
- Refuse to accept “deficit mindset” or use the “achievement gap” as an excuse
  - There’s no reason why students at a school with a lower socioeconomic status can’t perform music at a high level

**What questions and  
ideas do YOU have?**

**THANK YOU!!!**