

Private Instruction for Your Band and Orchestra Students!

The importance of a private teacher for any of your music program students cannot be underestimated. While some instructors may feel extra effort in this direction is futile due to economic circumstances or lack of understanding within school communities, there are many ways to go about getting students to become excited about lessons.

Regularly communicating the value of private lessons to our students is imperative. We need to become cheerleaders for private instruction, encouraging excellence. The attitude you impart towards private lessons begins with one or two students showing interest and eventually it becomes a tradition, passed word-of-mouth from parent to parent and between students. As educators we specialize on one instrument or instrument group in college and get a cursory overview of the others. In addition, there is rarely enough time during class to give in-depth instruction to individuals so it makes excellent sense to get other specialists involved in our students' education. Private lessons may be necessary to spark students' interest and achievement on instruments with which we are less familiar. We should never approach the need for private lessons solely from the standpoint of "it will help you get into honor band/orchestra!" The best way to promote is through your own excitement about the rewards of private lessons. In every case, it will benefit our regular classroom instruction and rehearsal.

Students at ALL levels and abilities will benefit from lessons. The ones at the high and low ends of the learning spectrum—those with whom we often spend extra time—will naturally benefit, and so will our "middle ground" students—those in the majority. Students at the upper end who challenge us in class and frequently get bored gain, through private instruction, a renewed enthusiasm as they become challenged themselves once again. Students with greater needs or special circumstances are able to gain a new level of confidence in private lessons, whereas in the classroom they may be frustrated, or worse—chastised by their peers, for learning at a slower rate.

A student, "Josh," signed up to take band in the 6th grade, eager to learn to play saxophone. I learned that he had Asperger's Syndrome, a form of autism, and it quickly became apparent that noise bothered him tremendously (the sounds of other beginning students warming up and experimenting). The acute awareness and inability to filter incoming sensory information is typical of this condition. In addition, his social skills were quite undeveloped. He was obviously uncomfortable in class and had a difficult time with hand position and embouchure formation. Other students were also becoming frustrated with his struggle and inappropriate outbursts. However, he was quick to absorb some of the information and displayed a terrific and sophisticated sense of humor, also common to this syndrome! I encouraged his parents to secure private lessons with an instructor in my area in lieu of band in 6th grade and then asked that he return in 7th grade. Not only did he return with excellent playing skills, but also his classmates were so excited at the improvement he had made that he became quite popular! Further, Josh became one of the most enthusiastic students and continued playing in high school.

What about the students who are in the middle—the ones who usually demand less of our attention, understand concepts readily, and learn well on their own? We may not feel they "need" attention, but we should be aware that our apparent lack of caring could become a convenient excuse for dropping out. These students are probably doing pretty well in most classes and could form a great interest in almost any area—music being just one. Many times it is these students who surprise us by saying they want to quit, when we thought they were the most satisfied with being in music class. These kids should be encouraged to study privately because this may be a rare opportunity for them to receive extra attention and encouragement. Also consider that future professional musicians and music teachers may arise from this group—how many of us were part of this group?

(continued...)

Lise F. Slack, Private Teacher (*continued*)

At the very beginning of every school year, renew your private teacher list (by making calls to each teacher and asking for updates) and hand it out to all your students with the “first day” packet.

Private teachers/section coaches can be found from the following (and there are probably others):

1. recommendations of other music directors in your area
2. local music stores
3. www.californiamusicstudios.com (with over 200 teachers throughout Southern California) 1.800.227.6222
4. S.C.S.B.O.A.
5. musicians' union (e.g. Local 47, Local 7, etc.)
6. symphony orchestra education department recommendations
7. other professional instrument and music teacher associations

Ideally, our students would be taking weekly private lessons AND we would have section coaches. Any little bit helps—if you can hire section coaches, they may set aside time for mini-lessons with individuals on occasion. I have hired instructors on all instruments to teach private lessons or sectionals after school. For the private lessons, the students usually paid half and candy money paid the other half (from the fundraiser pot). If they couldn't afford it, I would pay the entire amount from fundraisers. In some cases, the kids and parents became so enthusiastic, they ended up taking private lessons at home at their own expense. It may also be possible to direct some SIP funds to private instructors or to use funds that may have been spent on other items which are not as needed. Striving for excellence in individual players encourages growth of the entire group and should be at the top of our goals.

With our budgets in crisis mode and the economy slipping, it may be more difficult at this time, but a tradition can still be established. There will always be some students who will benefit and hence, so will your music program! We want our profession to be well respected. What better way can there be than allowing our students to experience the complexity and reward of studying music at an advanced level? Best wishes!