Pennsylvania Elementary Band Directors’ Methods for Student Instrument Selection

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Abstract:

The selection of an instrument is an exciting time in the life of a young musician. A close look at how this process takes place can be of use to both elementary band directors and pre-service teachers. The purpose of this study was to examine the methods used by elementary band directors in Pennsylvania to help their beginning students select instruments. Associated research questions included how the selection methods related to the balance of the beginning ensemble, what directors thought the ideal balance of a beginning ensemble should be, and directors’ priorities when helping their students select instruments.

Of 1,086 randomly selected elementary schools in Pennsylvania solicited to participate, 133 beginning band directors completed the online questionnaire.Teachers were asked questions about their own background, their instrument selection process, their band program, and their school. Preliminary results indicate that the majority of responding band directors (79.7%) began instruction in fourth grade. Most teachers limited the instruments available to be chosen by beginning students. The most commonly restricted instrument was bassoon (118 teachers, 93.8%), followed by tuba (81 teachers, 64.3%) and oboe (69 teachers, 41.2%). In regard to desired instrumentation, approximately one-third of responding teachers (30.4% and 30.1% respectively) reported having “considerably fewer” euphoniums and French horns than desired.

Teachers’ responses regarding their priorities when helping students select instruments revealed the most popular responses were student preferences (88%), balanced instrumentation (45.5%), and physical characteristics (43.2%).Most teachers allowed students to switch instruments if they were unhappy with their first choice, and a majority of teachers (62.7%) had changed their methods of instrument selection since they started teaching.The most common selection methods teachers used were teacher demonstration and having students try instruments. Other common methods were high school student demonstrations, examining physical characteristics, and limiting the number of percussionists.

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Applications to Teaching:

* The majority of the teachers in the study had made adjustments to their selection methods during their career, so teachers should not be afraid to make changes to their selection methods, and they should know that many of their colleagues across the state are experimenting as well.
* The directors of the most balanced bands placed limits on how many percussionists could be in the band.
* A greater percentage of the most balanced bands (69.2% of the balanced bands compared to 59.8% of all teachers) used teacher demonstration.
* None of the directors of the most balanced bands took the physical characteristics of their students into account, contrasting with 11.4% of all directors.
* Band programs that started in fourth grade had a higher percentage of students involved than those that started in third grade, and the bands that started in fifth grade had a higher percentage of students involved than those that started in fourth grade.
* When examining the group of directors that responded both to the question about what grade their schools’ string program started in and the question about the percentage of students involved in band (n=130), the group that had a strings program starting at the same time as band instruction had an average of 39.0% of the students enrolled in their beginning band program. The group of students whose schools had a string program that began one year earlier than the band program had an average of 30.5% of the students enrolled in their beginning band program. This would suggest that the best situation for involving the largest percentage of students in band would be to either have no strings program or to have a strings program that starts at the same time as the band program. Having a strings program that starts one year earlier is correlated with a smaller percentage of students being involved in the beginning band.
* Many band directors choose not to start students on certain instruments, the most common of which being bassoon (93.7%), tuba (64.3%), oboe (41.2%), and horn (23.0%).