

# Music Mentors

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Private lessons are a core benefit to any successful middle and high school music program. Often these lessons are taught by local professionals or college music students. However, many school districts are located in rural areas where local professionals and college students simply do not exist, or in low-income areas where financial constraints prevent families from affording lessons.

A parent's financial concerns or lack of private instructors should never stand in the way of a student receiving private instruction. One solution for your band program is to create a mentoring program. The learning and social collaborations between two students in a music mentor program can be invaluable to your music program, and create lasting impressions for both mentors and their students.

## What is a Mentor Music Program?

A music mentor program is a program in which the top students of a high school music program give private instrument instruction to middle school music students as well as high school freshman and sophomores.

Peer teaching develops the skills of both students – the one teaching as well as the one being taught. Most programs are designed so that mentors' participation is a privilege, for which they are not compensated. This system encourages the students to develop a peer relationship. Students participate because they enjoy making a difference for younger musicians, to demonstrate leadership experience and other skills to prospective colleges, and to fulfill community service requirements towards graduation.

Usually when a family cannot afford private lessons for their child, that student must go without. A mentoring program allows all students to enjoy the benefits of music lessons, regardless of their family's financial means.

## Recruiting Mentors

Prospective student mentors should demonstrate the following qualities:

- Academic and musical achievement
- Extra-curricular involvement
- Good communication skills
- Well-developed friendships with other students
- Confidence and independence
- Ability to manage their own transportation needs

Once you have identified students who would make capable mentors, request that these students attend an informal meeting about the mentoring program. The heart of the meeting is inspiring them with a sense of importance in the work they'll be doing ... they are creating the future of their own band or orchestra! Share with prospective mentors the opportunity to develop their leadership and communication skills, which will be an attractive skill to colleges to which they are applying. Create a vision for them of the fulfillment of helping a younger peer to achieve their musical dreams.

Before the meeting, enlist the support of these students' parents' in having their child serve as a mentor, so that the path is clear for them to participate if they are interested in doing so.

### **Developing the mentors**

There will be several training meetings for mentors, to ensure that they are approaching the lesson situation with appropriate sense of responsibility and are prepared for the teaching experience. These meetings should be mandatory for new and returning mentors alike, both to develop students' skills and to create a culture of excellence in the program as a whole. These meetings take place during the first month of school, while the middle school students are enrolling into the program.

In the first mentor training meeting, teach several mini-lessons with a mentor student in front of the group. Follow each mini-lesson with a group discussion of the teaching strategies you used, and brainstorm other strategies that might also be effective. These discussions will help the mentors begin to develop a model of the private teaching relationship and the skills involved.

During the next two meetings, give each mentor an opportunity to teach a fellow mentor in front of the group for several minutes on a short, easy piece. Follow each mock lesson with a group discussion of the teaching strategies used and feedback on the student's skills and professionalism.

When set up as a positive, non-judgmental space in which everyone is learning and improving, this training is a very powerful experience for the mentor students. The feedback process is an additional opportunity to coach students on communication skills and the importance of giving constructive, positive comments. Meanwhile, the mock lessons will give you insight into each mentor's teaching skills and alert you to areas that may require additional training and supervision.

Mentors should be given basic instruction for choosing materials and structuring lessons. Give them an opportunity to see a few instructional books on their chosen instrument, as well as etude books and solo literature. Each mentor should ideally teach two students, giving them an opportunity to observe different learning styles and develop flexibility as a teacher, and increasing the odds that at least one of the relationships will be a great fit.

Provide a list of what should be covered in a typical lesson – scales, exercises, solo literature (this includes audition material for more advanced students), their band / orchestra music, and etudes. Also give mentors a standardized assignment sheet, which they will fill out for their students each lesson.

This mentoring relationship has specifically musical goals; mentors should be trained in setting appropriate boundaries should family or personal issues arise with a given student. Mentors should be clear how they would handle these situations, seeking to maintain the integrity of the musical mentor relationship and taking care to avoid stepping into a parental or counseling role.

### **Recruiting Lesson Students**

All entering band and orchestra students should receive an informational packet at the beginning of the year to take home and read over with their parents. The last page should be a form that states the parent and the student have read through the material together and either *will* or *will not* be participating in the mentor program. Once the forms are returned, the middle and high school directors will set up mentor lessons with interested families.

Be sure to follow up one-on-one with parents of students who did not return a “yes” form. Support the parents in making the right decision for their family, but don’t be shy about advocating on the child’s behalf for the tremendous opportunity of private lessons. Often families that are initially a “no” begin to reconsider as the semester unfolds and they see participating students performing at a higher level.

First-year middle school students are the future of both the middle and high school music programs. When these students experience being successful on their instrument, having fun, and getting recognition from family and friends, your concert orchestra or band is a done deal!

## **Location and Supervision**

Lessons should take place before or after school, at the middle school if possible (high school students are more able to provide for their own transportation). If the middle school does not have a sufficient practice rooms to accommodate the lessons, the director may collaborate with classroom teachers for additional space. All lessons should be assigned to a specific location before lessons begin for the semester. Mentor students should be responsible for setting up the room for the lesson before the student arrives, and for returning the room to its original state.

While lessons take place, there should be a teacher present in the building who is responsible for checking in on students and dealing with any needs that arise. The supervising teacher should keep an up-to-date schedule of all students and room assignments, and is responsible for locking and unlocking the rooms as needed. Supervising teachers should check in regularly on students as an opportunity to review mentor teachers’ effectiveness and ensure that both teacher and student are engaged and on-task.

Create a structure for your mentors to talk with you once a month and share how the lessons are going. Use this opportunity to offer ideas for teaching strategies and/or helpful perspectives, acknowledge them for their commitment and successes, and use role reversal to help them practice using new skills. Let the mentor know it is okay to not have all the answers; teaching is a skill that develops over time, and each student presents unique needs and challenges.

In the rare event that a particular mentor-mentee relationship is simply not a good fit, arrangements can be made to find a placement that will be more rewarding and effective for both students.

## **Parent Involvement**

The mentor program should be set up in a way that minimizes the additional burden on parents, whose lives are already quite full with work and family responsibilities. The parents’ role in their child’s music lessons should be something that is welcomed and encouraged, not something that will be experienced as a burden on the family.

Include information about the mentor program in the initial meeting with new band or orchestra parents at the beginning of the year. Let them know the benefits of the program, and emphasize the importance of each student enrolling in lessons. Give the parents a sense that their children are participating in something special, with its own culture and magic that goes beyond showing up for a piano lesson, playing your songs, and going home again.

Mentors should also attend the initial parent meeting, and are introduced in front of the group. Ask parents to meet briefly with the mentor during the last ten minutes of the first lesson, so that parents and mentors have a face-to-face relationship and can share goals and expectations.

## **Resource Library**

An organized and well-supplied music library is essential for the mentor program. The library should include instrumental methods, etudes, and graded solo literature for all of the instruments taught in the mentoring program, allowing the mentor student and participating families to purchase only the materials that will provide the most benefit.

The library should also include a listening station with an extensive collection of music in many different genres, allowing students to educate themselves in various composers and musical styles as well as to study the pieces they are playing or teaching.

Local businesses are often highly motivated to increase their presence in the community through their support of worthy causes. Your mentoring program provides just this kind of community service – you are creating student leadership, enriching art and culture in the community, and providing opportunities to economically disadvantaged students.

Businesses in your community can donate money to underwrite the cost of the creating the music library, purchase instruments for low-income students, or contribute toward a collection of pre-professional instruments for talented students to use when taking a college audition. Develop an informational brochure to solicit business donations, and make the most of these valuable links to the wider community!

## **The end result**

As months and years pass by, the overall level of the mentors will rise as the program begins to develop a culture of excellence and students find their individual teaching styles.

Once the program has been in place for two to three years, the middle school students who first began in the mentoring program will be entering the high school. These students now have a great relationship not only with at least one current member of the band, but also with the program itself. These students will be entering the high school band or orchestra well-prepared and excited! They will begin to enjoy friendships with the students who were formerly their teachers, while still looking to them for leadership and guidance.

As they gain musical proficiency and maturity, these up-and-coming leaders are motivated to mentor younger students, passing on the attention they received to the next generation. The result is a musical community that demonstrates the best qualities of maturity, leadership, friendship, and fine musicianship.