

When a Student Quits Band

An instrumental music survey project by Travis J. Weller

Student enrollment and retention has long been a topic of interest to band directors (Martignetti, 1965). There is extant research regarding both student attraction to and withdraw from band at elementary and middle school levels. While the purpose, scope, and role of the band in music education has at points changed and evolved, retention has continued to be a challenge for directors to understand and adapt to in certain situations. To help directors meet the challenge of this issue, a survey was developed to discover and examine strategies that directors can utilize in a situation when a student wishes to drop band. From the existing body of research, directors should be mindful of several important aspects when confronted with a student that wishes to drop band. A review of these aspects – both connected to initial enrollment and attraction as well as attrition – is pertinent before reviewing the results of the survey. It is possible that one of these aspects is missing in the life of a band student thereby contributing to their decision to withdraw.

Review of Related Literature and Research

Parental support has been an important part of a student's initial enrollment and participation. Warnock (2009) suggested that stronger parental support towards school music is a greater predictor of sixth grade students choice to participate in a music ensemble. Sichivitsa (2004) indicated that students in choir whose parents were involved in music and supportive of their music studies developed better self-concepts in music, helped them feel more comfortable in choir academically and socially, valued music more, and as a result were motivated to continue music participation in the future. Kinney (2010) indicated that students who achieved a higher academic level and those students from two-parent/two-guardian homes were more likely to begin instruction and continue in band. Data collected in Droe's study supports support previous literature indicating rural and urban community parents had a strong perceived connection with their school, and it was higher than that of parents in suburban contexts in his study (Droe, 2014).

Peer influence has been identified as another aspect of enrollment and persistence in band. Warnock (2005) noted that attraction to middle school beginning band is influenced by social reasons (e.g. peer influence). Warnock indicated that students' musical friends endorse band participation while the pressure from outside peers tends to curb interest in band. In his 2005 study, Warnock discovered that the endorsement from friends of band was stronger than influences from parents and the students' home. Sichivitsa (2004) discovered an interesting intersection as it applies to parental support and peer influence. In that study, children who felt supported by their parents and teachers were more likely to value musical experiences, and were motivated to continue in music.

Academic factors have been another area identified as critical when students make decisions on continuing to study music. Hoffman suggested that her previous research indicated that school policies and structures to improve student achievement might prohibit students from being able to full participate in music classes (Hoffman, 2013). Hartley (1996) indicated that retention was not influenced by the starting grade of instruction. Hartley also shared that the type of arrangement of grade-level organization may be advantageous in retaining a higher number of students in the band program regardless of the starting grade level. Gamin (2005) discovered that scheduling conflicts were ranked significantly lower for rural teachers than urban or suburban teachers, though it may have been due to an unbalanced sample size and the small number of rural teachers represented in that study. It is interesting to note that Stewart (2005) discovered that rural teachers were significantly less likely to cite scheduling conflicts as a cause of attrition. Stewart also shared that academic pressure was a concern reported by participants. Prior research has demonstrated that the highest attrition rates occurred when students change school rather than moving between grade levels in the same school.

Related to academic factors, **outside activities and schedules** has been another area which has some impact on students' decision to enroll in band. In addition to academic pressure, Stewart (2005) shared that time management was reported by students as concerns. Stewart further suggested to directors to examine competing activities to better plan and schedule opportunities that the band can offer. The reasons students offered for dropping band were consistent with previous research, an indication that students found other activities more worthwhile than band (the average was 20-25%). Stewart suggested directors could offer students opportunities for socially valued roles band or recruiting students by inviting them to be a part of socially valued activities to maintain and increase retention. Hartley (1996) stated that instrumental music could be offered more easily as part of the middle school or junior high school schedule and not conflict with outside activities. Prior research indicated that students who met more regularly for instruction had higher retention rates. Gamin (2005) found that programs that pulled students out of the regular classroom for lessons had significantly higher attrition rates than those with a dedicated lesson time. Gamin further shared that conflicts with extracurricular activities, a major factor in attrition studies dealing with high school students, did not seem to be a major factor in the examination of first year student attrition. Furthermore, academic difficulty (ranked 2nd in that study), was cited less frequently in the literature regarding more experienced students as being a cause of attrition.

Musical ability and attitude is another area to which director may need to attend to as it applied to attrition and retention. Gamin (2005) identified practice time required, academic problems, and perceived instrument difficulty as three highest-ranked attrition factors. These aspects were consistent with the literature regarding motivation in music. Stewart (2005) found that students who were enrolled in private lessons, liked participating, found band valuable, and liked performing in events outside of school were more likely to stay enrolled in band than other students. The participants indicated that unwillingness to spend time practicing and poor academic performance were major causes of attrition.

Description and Results of the Survey

The purpose of the present survey was to gather data and perspectives on student attrition in band programs and how directors address students in these situations. Participants were asked to provide basic demographic information, provide estimates from their personal teaching experience, and explain academic policies and individual program guidelines as it relates to retention of students in band. The survey illuminated differences in the settings and contexts, the structure, and district/ensemble policies as it relates to a student withdrawing from band. It is possible there are several commonalities that exist that would be helpful for directors to consider as they help their students navigate this decision.

Participants were invited to contribute via an open invitation posted to several different social media platforms. Participation was strictly voluntary. The survey was open for two weeks and information was collected through a Google Form. In addition to providing basic demographic information and responding to several prompts using a Likert-scale, participants were offered the opportunity to contribute additional information through some open-ended questions. Data was coded and analyzed with appropriate statistical tests. Results of the data provided descriptive statistics and qualitative perspective for the benefit of band directors who must work with a student who wishes to drop out of the band program.

With all data represented in this survey, readers and interested parties should interpret results with caution. Some of the ratings provided are perceptions from the directors regarding decisions made by students, not reasons directly expressed by the student. The unique context and community in which each school is located also can influence a band program's policies. Directors were asked to provide estimated numbers for the students who enroll and drop in a given year.

Some highlights from the demographic information provided by participants (N=106):

- The majority of participants were from the United States (32 different states) and 3 provinces from Canada were also represented.
- Participants averaged over 16 years of teaching. This participant group on average had 15.5 years teaching band, and had been in their current position for over 8 years.
- When examining their teaching assignments, 34% of participant directors taught 5 or more grade levels of band, 27% taught four grade levels of band, and 20% taught three grade levels of band (the majority of those directors in middle school/junior high settings). The remaining 19% taught two grade levels of band or less.
- The majority of participant directors taught in suburban contexts (54%). Directors teaching in rural and urban contexts comprised 33% and 15% respectively of the participating director group.
- Directors averaged teaching 154 students across the grade levels of band to which they were assigned. On average, 10 students per year decide to withdraw from band (6.7%).
- Directors teaching in rural contexts saw a lower number of students across the grade levels of band they were assigned (average of 109) and a slightly higher percentage of students who wanted to withdraw (9 students on average, 8.3%).
- Directors teaching in urban contexts saw a higher number of students across the grade levels of band they were assigned (average of 186) but the percentage of students who wanted to withdraw (6.1%) was slightly lower than the average of all participant directors.
- Overall, directors rated the support from their administration on their policy to withdraw from band favorably (4.17 out of 5). This rating was relatively consistent across all three teaching contexts.

Participant directors were asked to explain their policy that permits a student to drop band. An analysis of these different policies demonstrated some commonalities. Specific policies and practices can vary widely from one school or district to another based upon the context. The role of directors, parents, counselors, and administrators, as well as the timeframes and criteria for dropping out, can differ significantly based on local policies and practices. There may not be a universal solution, so nuanced discussions initiated by the director with their administration to craft a supported and helpful policy for all students are important. When crafting a policy that allows a student to drop band, directors should consider the following aspects.

1. **Parental Permission:** Parents should be involved in the decision-making process.
2. **Limited Timeframes:** The timeframes can vary, often driven by individual school settings. The beginning of the school year, the end of a semester, or the first few weeks of a grading period are the most common timeframes. One option to make clear to students is that they are committing to a full year experience. This might be beneficial in eliminating the need for establishing a timeframe in the policy.
3. **Communication and Counselor Involvement:** Communication between the band director and guidance counselor is important as counselors often have a role in approving or facilitating schedule changes. Prior to any change being made, a conversation should be initiated between director and counselor.
4. **Exceptions and Extenuating Circumstances:** There are exceptions and extenuating circumstances that arise (e.g., behavior issues, academic struggles, family circumstances). These situations require all interested parties to discuss any exception to the established drop period.
5. **Grade-Specific Policies:** Policies for dropping out of band may differ based on the grade level of the students. This policy can differ between buildings within a single district provided there is logical reasoning driven by unique curricular requirements (e.g., all students must have a performing arts credit in the 6th grade, but it is not required at the high school level).

When asked if they made contact with the parents regarding a student dropping band, a majority of the directors responded Yes/Always (56.8%) or Often (25.5%) (see Table 1). Table 2 shows the overall results of this strategy. Despite a director initiating this step, it rarely resulted in the student changing their

mind (Rarely – 61.8%, Never 7.8%). It should be noted that some directors reported having limited success utilizing this strategy (Often – 29.4%, Always 2.0%).

Table 1 – Percentage of directors who contact parents

Director Group (106)	Percentage
Yes/Always contact parents (n=60)	56.8%
Often contact parents (n=27)	25.5%
Rarely contact parents (n=15)	14.2%
Never contact parents (n=4)	3.8%

Table 2 – Success rate of retaining the student after contacting parents

Responses (102)	Percentage
Always succeeds (n=1)	1.0%
Often succeeds (n=30)	29.4%
Rarely succeeds (n=63)	61.8%
Never succeeds (n=8)	7.8%

When asked if they made contact with the other students/peers to encourage the student to remain enrolled in band, the results were more a bit more even. Table 3 show the percentage of directors who utilize this strategy, and Table 4 show the overall success rate. A slight majority of directors (51.4%) reported that they “Rarely” or “Never” contacted other students or peers. The remaining group of directors (48.6%) reported they “Yes/Always” or “Often” contact other students or peers. Few directors reported having consistent success when initiating peers and other students to assist with retention efforts.

Table 3 – Percentage of directors who contact peers or other students

Director Group (106)	Percentage
Yes/Always contact peers (n=18)	16.5%
Often contact peers (n=34)	32.1%
Rarely contact peers (n=36)	34.9%
Never contact peers (n=18)	16.5%

Table 4 – Success rate of retaining the student after contacting peers/other students

Responses (88)	Percentage
Always succeeds (n=2)	2.3%
Often succeeds (n=19)	21.6%
Rarely succeeds (n=56)	63.6%
Never succeeds (n=11)	12.5%

An examination of several sub-groups within the participant director group was completed. When examining the data based upon the director’s teaching context (i.e., Rural, Suburban, Urban), the statistical data and ratings for the two aspects above (i.e., Contacting Parents, Contacting Peers) were nearly identical for the Suburban (n=57) and Rural Director Groups (n=33). Due to having less than 30 participants who identified teaching in urban contexts (n=16), it would unfair to analyze the data provided by that director group.

The participants were also split into a group teaching three or less grade levels (n=48), and a group teaching four or more grade levels (n=58). Directors teaching three or less groups rated five of the various aspects higher than their counterparts (Economic, Social, Parental Support, Gender, and Instrument Quality) and a statistical analysis revealed one noticeable difference. Directors teaching three or less grade levels had a slightly higher percentage of students who dropped band (8.2%) as compared to those teaching four or more grade levels (5.6%) This finding based upon the number of grade levels taught was statistically significant at the $\alpha = 0.05$ level.

A possible explanation for this slightly elevated percentage of students who drop among directors who teach three or less grade levels could be related to the foundational relationship that develops between teacher and student. If the director has limited time to build an appropriate connection to students and understand their basic needs to grow as a musician and person, the student may become disengaged and more inclined to drop band. Still, as the majority of directors in this sub-group taught three grade levels (29) as opposed to only two (14) or one grade level (5), there may be other specific aspects that are influencing students in those settings. The majority of directors teaching three grade levels reported instructing band in grades 6 through 8, likely meaning they are the only band director students see in a commonly found middle school setting.

The director group was also split into two sub-groups based upon experience, and it yielded one interesting perspective to consider. Directors with less than 15 years of total teaching experience were twice as likely (22%) to contact the peers of a student who wished to drop band than their counterparts with 15 years or more of total teaching experience (11%). The directors with less than 15 years of teaching experience reported having slightly more success (25%) as opposed to their counterparts with 15 or more years of teaching experience (15%). Given the prior research by both Sichivitsa (2004) and Warnock (2005), it would seem utilizing peer influence might help influence a student positively to stay in band rather than dropping.

Directors were also posed an open-end question about other strategies they would use when a student shares they wish to drop band. When speaking to students who express their desire to drop, there are a number of aspects directors should keep in mind. It is important to note that these ideas vary depending on the specific circumstances and reasons behind a student's decision to drop band. Although nearly half the participant directors reported as “Always” or “Often” making contact with peers, that line of thinking was wholly absent from the open-ended comments provided by participant directors. Directors should aspire to provide support and guidance while respecting the individual choices of their students. Based on the responses from directors in this survey, the most prominent ideas are as follows:

1. **Communication and Understanding:** Many directors emphasize the importance of talking to the student to understand their reasons for wanting to drop out. This involves having one-on-one conversations to determine the underlying issues or concerns.
2. **Offering Solutions:** After listening to the problems or concerns raised by the student, directors can offer ideas to change their perception of staying in band (e.g., suggesting instrument changes, offering extra support through private lessons).
3. **Encouragement:** Simple and succinct words of encouragement from the director to a student to remain enrolled and complete the year may be very helpful (i.e., benefits of perseverance, unique future experiences they can be a part of, the commitment policy of the band program at that grade level).
4. **Parental Involvement:** Directors may involve parents in the discussion to ensure everyone is on the same page.
5. **Empathy, Support, and Open Door Policy:** Directors need to acknowledge the student's feelings and reassure them that their choice is respected. Moving beyond the immediate moment,

directors can remind students that they can return to the band program in the future if they change their mind.

6. **Examine Student Personal Growth:** Some students need help to overcome personal challenges (e.g., insecurity, lack of skills). These challenges may be contributing to the student's desire to drop.
7. **Involvement of Guidance or Administration:** Directors may involve guidance counselors or administration in the process, especially when there are extenuating circumstances (e.g., academic pressure from other subjects, conflicts with an extracurricular activity).
8. **Proactive Culture Building:** A few directors mention the importance of proactive culture building to reduce the likelihood of students wanting to drop out. Building a positive and engaging band environment can help retain students.

Directors were then asked to rate eight different aspects that possibly influence a student's decision to drop band. Using a scale from 1 (rarely) to 5 (frequently), directors rated the aspects of Economic, Social, Academic, Scheduling, Parental Support, Time Commitment, Gender Factors, Instrument Quality, and Athletics. Table 5 includes the aspect, a brief example used in the survey, the mean and standard deviation. The highest ratings in order were Scheduling, Athletics, Parental Support, and Academics.

Table 5 – Director Ratings of Aspects that Influence a Student's Decision to Drop Band

Aspect	Mean	Std. Dev.
Economic (e.g., Student could not afford to maintain rental agreement)	2.16	1.19
Social (e.g., Student did not feel accepted, friends were not involved in band)	2.83	1.17
Academic (e.g., student is concerned about the work in other courses and cannot devote time to band)	3.28	1.22
Scheduling (e.g., band is scheduled in an exploratory block of classes, band scheduled against AP classes or singleton/unique subjects)	3.63	1.29
Parental Support (e.g., student discouraged from practicing, parents are not supportive of music)	3.33	1.29
Time Commitment (e.g., practice schedule outside of school was too demanding)	3.11	1.24
Gender Factors (e.g., a student is the only person of the opposite gender in a section, a student is the opposite gender of their instructor and is uncomfortable)	1.25	0.58
Instrument Quality (e.g., a student is playing on an older school instrument, a student is playing on instrument that has been in their family for a number of years)	1.94	1.10
Athletics (e.g., student receives pressure from athletic coaches, conflicting practice times)	3.34	1.39

An inter-item correlation of these aspects was completed to better understand how these aspects might interplay in the school context. Pearson's correlation coefficient (r) is a measure of the strength and direction of the association between two variables on an interval scale. A correlation coefficient found to be between 0.00 and 0.30 has generally been considered to have little if any statistical relationship, and a correlation between 0.30 and 0.50 would indicate a low positive correlation. The majority of correlations among these aspects fell below the 0.30 level, but there were two exceptions.

A low positive correlation was discovered between Economic and Instrument Quality aspects ($r = 0.356$). As these two aspects were rated lower in terms of influencing a student's decision, it is possible that this

association is not a prominent concern among participant directors. It is possible some directors in this survey are able to provide quality instruments to students who are in need so this issue is minor.

Another low positive correlation was discovered between Scheduling and Academic aspects ($r = 0.471$) and was found to be significant at $\alpha = 0.01$ level. Some directors expressed concern over the class schedule that forces students to choose band or a singleton course that might have more relevance to their career path (e.g., a student pursuing a career in health must choose anatomy or band). Other directors shared their concern over the pressure students share for taking AP/dual enrollment classes in order to advance their collegiate/university studies. Directors in lower grade levels expressed a level of frustration with how their band period is scheduled into an exploratory block with limited meeting time (e.g., during a six day cycle the band only meets as a full group twice). Given the comments shared by participants in the open ended question regarding other aspects that influence a student's decision to drop band, this association does bear further examination and attention as directors speak with students about wanting to drop band.

As mentioned in the previous paragraph, directors were asked to share additional perspective on aspects that influence a student's decision to drop band in an open-ended question. These aspects shared by directors illustrate the complex interplay of personal, parental, and social influences on a student's decision to drop out of a band program. Directors often face the challenge of addressing these various factors, at points simultaneously, to encourage retention and foster a positive musical learning environment.

1. **Parental Priorities:** Some parents believe that sports offer better future opportunities and earnings, and they may not see the value in their child dedicating time to practicing an instrument. Additionally, if parents do not hold their children accountable for their commitments and practice, students may not feel motivated to continue in the band program. Parents who do not fully appreciate the benefits of a band program may adversely influence their child's decision to drop out.
2. **Instant Gratification and Lack of Patience:** Students may want quick results and may become discouraged by the long-term commitment and effort required to excel in playing a musical instrument. Parents may also lack the patience to support their child's practice and progress.
3. **Scheduling Conflicts:** Scheduling conflicts with other extracurricular activities, especially sports, can lead to students dropping out of the band program. This can be found across all levels of education. Students who participate in multiple extracurricular activities may feel overwhelmed and choose to drop band as a way to reduce their commitments.
4. **Social influence:** Peer pressure and social dynamics can influence a student's decision to remain enrolled or drop out of band. Some students may prioritize time with their friends over their personal interest in band, leading them to make decisions that align with their friend group's choices and interests.
5. **Instrument Selection:** Some students may have been placed on an instrument that is not a good fit for them, sometimes due to parental influence or access to an instrument.
6. **Lack of Interest:** Students may simply lose interest in band over time, and this disinterest can be a significant factor in their decision to drop out.
7. **Perception of Difficulty & Other Academics:** Some students may perceive band as too difficult or demanding, especially when they see other elective options as easier or less time-consuming. On the other side, students may drop band in pursuit of higher GPAs or academic recognition, especially if the grading system in their school incentivizes other courses over music.
8. **Fear of Performance:** Performance anxiety or fear of performing in front of others can lead some students to drop out of band, particularly if they find the experience too stressful.

Conclusions

The study confirmed and revealed a number of important aspects when a student is confronted the decision to drop band. It is vital that directors communicate with the student and understanding the individual or underlying influences. As these conversations begin, directors must involve parents, administrators, and guidance counselors. While the influence of peers cannot be discounted, directors must be sensitive involving other students. Before approaching the peers to act in a mediation role, directors should get permission from the student who is considering dropping. Ultimately the decision belongs to the student and directors must respect their privacy.

In these situations, directors are an important person as a student faces this decision. There are several key points directors should aspire to bring about in their teaching. The first is to ensure that every student is able to forge a meaningful personal connection to music. The second is to influence students to become the best version of themselves as a person and a musician. The third is to think, lead, and act with the best interest of all students in mind. The encouragement a director can provide to a student in this situation is central to each of the aforementioned points. Directors need to consider alternatives and solutions that might help the student remain enrolled and engaged within the band program. Acknowledging the student's feelings, reminding them the director is their partner through the process, and that the process is to find what is best for the student are important aspects in that immediate moment.

Directors can still be advocates for their program and the potential benefits and experiences the band offers to the student, and keep an open door, chair, instrument, and stand waiting for them should they change their mind. At points, directors often make substantial personal investments in the success of their band program. It can be difficult for a director to separate those personal feelings when a student is questioning whether or not they should remain involved. Directors must remember that students have personal feelings too that may not align with the vision for the program. A director who handles this situation with grace, respect, empathy, and understanding will last longer in the memory of a student than the music they played in the ensemble.

The comments in the open-ended questions of this survey reflected an empathetic group of directors as it relates to students who are considering dropping out of band. The aspects of parental support, peer influence, academics and scheduling, and conflicts with other activities should be taken into consideration when directors are trying to help students in this situation. The ideas shared in this survey of what to include in a drop policy for students provide a good framework for band directors at any level to consider. As directors keep band programs moving forward, it is imperative to re-examine issues like this to ensure they have done everything possible to serve the students they teach.

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