

Dear Parents (*An open letter to parents of future band students by Tracy E. Leenman*),

Congratulations! Your child has chosen to start band class this fall! This is exciting! But naturally, you are also apprehensive – “How much will this cost?” “Will my child like it?” “How do we choose the right instrument?” “Will my child stick with it? After all, he’s tried karate, gymnastics, piano, and soccer . . . and quit them all.” “*Does my child even have any musical ability?*”

A survey done a few years ago showed that 45% of parents responding would not buy a musical instrument or pay for lessons for their child unless they “knew that their child had some musical talent.” But how do you know if your child has musical talent if he’s never held an instrument or been taught how to play? How could you possibly know? [Would you refuse to give your child golf clubs and take him to the driving range unless you knew that, some day, he’d be a scratch golfer?] And even if your child never becomes a symphony musician (the musical equivalent of playing in the PGA), he may still be able to enjoy a lifetime of involvement in playing music, at whatever level – and that’s certainly an endeavor worth supporting!

Parents often ask: “Will my child like it? Will my child stick with it?” A child’s success in music is directly related to several factors:

1) **Support.** Parents who are encouraging, especially through the difficult times, teach their children to reach out and to take risks, to rise to challenges, and to pursue their dreams with confidence. In contrast, parents who say, “My child never sticks with anything” are being unfair to their children, and laying the groundwork for a pattern of discouragement. This is true for any endeavor, not just music; but it is one of the reasons that studying music in school can have a life-long benefit on a child’s psychosocial development.

2) **Attitude.** Parents who understand the value of music in a child’s education, and the lifelong benefits of studying music, will be thrilled that their children are participating in band, and will give this endeavor their full support. Their enthusiasm will be contagious, and their children will approach their musical studies with excitement as well. For parents who may not have seen the research on this, please know that it is plentiful, and irrefutable. Just a few examples:

- Middle school and high school students who participated in instrumental music scored significantly higher than their non-band peers in standardized tests. University studies conducted in Georgia and Texas found significant correlations between the number of years of instrumental music instruction and academic achievement in math, science and language arts (University of Sarasota Study, Jeffrey Lynn Kluball; East Texas State University Study, Daryl Erick Trent).

- Musical training appears to enhance dramatically a child’s abstract thinking skills and spatial-temporal ability – skills necessary for mathematics and science – even more than computer instruction does (Dr. Frances Rauscher, Univ. of California-Irvine).

- Students in school music programs show an 11% improvement in academics after one year of music study, a 14% improvement after two years, a 17% improvement after three years, and a 23% improvement after four years (Dr. Tim Lautzenheiser, *Attitude Concepts for Today*).

- High school music students score higher on SATs in both verbal and math than their peers. In 2006, SAT takers with four years of coursework/experience in music performance scored 100 points higher than students with no coursework/experience in the arts (The College Board, Princeton, NJ).

- A school band is a microcosm of society. It teaches cooperation, respect, listening skills, analysis and synthesis, creativity and expression, personal responsibility, interpersonal communication; all the psychosocial skills most sought after by Fortune 500 corporations in future employees. In short playing a musical instrument teaches life skills that are adaptable (and applicable) to every personal and professional challenge.

You can go to www.supportmusic.com and www.amc-music.org for many more reasons that your child should continue to study music throughout his/her entire school career. Studying music benefits a child’s education in ways that no other subject can, as the skills needed to excel in music are transferable to every academic subject.

3) **Consistency.** My husband and I have six children. Each of them took piano lessons beginning in fourth grade, and a band instrument beginning in fifth grade. There was never a question, never a doubt. We believe strongly in the value of music in every family’s daily lifestyle, and in the importance of music in every child’s education; and our children “caught” this attitude early on as well. If parents consider music an academic subject (rather than co- or extra-curricular), they will give performing music classes the same priority they give all other academic subjects. They will insist that their children do their music homework (i.e., practicing) just like every other academic subject’s homework, and will enforce the same consequences for not doing music homework as they effect for neglecting other homework. If children do their homework regularly, they will progress, just like in every other academic subject. Once they progress, and begin to play well, playing will be its own reward. We all love music; we all love to do what we do well. On the other hand, we all hate falling behind or not being “as good as everyone else” at something. Because performing music requires neuromuscular and psychomotor development as well as intellect, doing daily music homework is usually necessary *before* a child can progress enough to “like it.”

4) **Open-mindedness.** Encourage your child to keep his/her mind open about choosing an instrument, until he/or she has been screened. Mom may think it’s a great idea that her son play saxophone, but the child may be too small even to hold the sax correctly or to reach around the palm keys. And besides, every school has far too many saxophone-player wannabes! Dad may not want his son to play flute, or his

daughter to play trombone, but in reality, instruments are not gender-specific. James Galway, Jean-Pierre Rampal, and Tadeu Coelho are all world-famous (male) flutists. Deanna Slobodan is a professional tuba player. My father played clarinet, and he was 6'3" and weighed well over 250 pounds; no one ever called him a "girl," trust me! The instrument(s) that a child is best physically suited to play, and that offers him/her the best opportunity for success, are the instrument(s) they should be encouraged to play. And please remember that there are some instruments that will open doors for college scholarships and performing opportunities more than others, e.g. double reeds (oboe and bassoon), and low brass (French horn, euphonium, trombone and tuba), so if these are the instruments recommended to your child, *smile* – don't lament that they were not chosen to play trumpet or sax. About 75% of the students screened leave with a totally different instrument than they'd originally planned on . . . and they are happier and more excited about playing than ever! A screening only takes about 20 minutes, and it's a great opportunity for you and your child to see and try all the instruments offered to beginning students; rather than simply choosing what looks the shiniest, what all the "cool" kids are playing, what Mom or Dad or an older sibling once played, or what's been sitting up in Grandma's attic for 40 years, because "it's what we already own."

Another reason to remain open-minded – things have changed since you were in school, Mom and Dad. Most beginning bands no longer include "drums," but ask their students to begin learning *percussion* on a practice pad, a set of bells, or both. This way, they learn to read music and play scales just like the other band students, and they can focus on making music, not noise. Very few schools use drum *sets*, though they may have one for their more advanced and/or jazz band students. Please understand that drum set playing is in many ways as different an art from modern school percussion as snow skiing is from water skiing. If your child has already taken drum (set) lessons, this may or may not mean he should play percussion in school; sometimes, it's harder to re-learn technique than it is to learn a totally different instrument. And please understand that a snare drum from a drum set won't work as well for school (you wouldn't try to take your water skis to Vail, or your snow skis to the ocean, would you?). You will not save any money by doing this – by the time you add a concert-height stand and a carrying case, and concert sticks, you will likely spend more than you would on a regular student snare kit.

5) **Money . . . NOT!** Participation in beginning band classes does not have to be expensive. Many beginning instruments (flute, clarinet, trumpet, and trombone) can be rented for very reasonable monthly rates, usually around \$30 per month, with 100% of that going towards the purchase. Saxophones, and percussion are usually more expensive. Often, the school will have oboes, bassoons, French horns, euphoniums, and tubas that you can rent from the school for a very reasonable fee, but if your child's instrument is too large to carry back and forth between home and school, he/she will definitely need to have one available at school and another for home use. Again, doing homework daily (practicing) is the key not only to success in band or strings, but also to the enjoyment of playing music.

Parents may try save money by buying an inexpensive instrument either on line, or at a store that is not a true school music dealer. They believe this will be the least expensive way to get an instrument, and say they don't want to spend money on a better quality instrument "until we know the child likes it." But some of these instruments are not at all suitable for school use – they are not made for durability, parts may not be available should they break, they may not even play in the correct key. We have seen ISO's – Instrument Shaped Objects - that play a full half-step lower than "real" instruments. This, too, is unfair to your child. And not less expensive, either – you may spend more money on repairs than you did for the instrument itself. Or, your child may get discouraged, and quit all together (which happens in the vast majority of cases), and then the entire purchase price is wasted. In contrast, if you are renting, and your child leaves the program, then you are out only a few months' rent, usually far less than you'd spend on an ISO.

Brands and models have changed a great deal from when we were in school band. Even the quintessential go-to student brand, Bundy, is sadly no longer. New brands from a variety of sources are springing up practically everyday, some suitable for school use and others not. You may want your child to play the instrument you loved so much when you were in school, but that is not always wise (or inexpensive). Your child may be uncomfortable with a tarnished old instrument, in a case that looks (and smells) nothing like anyone else's, and is probably significantly heavier to carry around. The fact that the instrument you once played "looks too old" to your child is not nearly as important as the fact that parts may no longer be available for that instrument, or that the re-pad it needs would cost more than the instrument is worth. Sentimentality is a great reason to have your old instrument made into a lamp, or displayed on the wall; it's not a good reason for your child to be at a disadvantage in his/her music class.

In the long run, the least expensive way to obtain an instrument for your child is usually from a reputable school music dealer. Ask questions – about discounts, return privileges, carrying charges, your particular teacher's choice of brands and accessories (your school music dealer should be well-acquainted with your teacher and his/her requirements and preferences, where the various instruments are made and what their specs are, and so on). Compare purchase *versus* rental versus lease prices. Ask if they will deliver to your school. Be sure your school music dealer has access to a certified repair technician. If a school music dealer is a member of your state music educators' association, and the National Association of School Music Dealers (NASMD), you can be sure they are a company that focuses on and cares about school music programs.

Believe me; with your support and encouragement, your child *will* succeed in music class. He/she *will* love it. He/she will learn skills that will benefit him throughout his life. Whatever investment you make will pay huge dividends in your child's cognitive, academic, social, and creative development. And your whole family will benefit from being involved in music as well. Please allow us to wish you and your child great success in all of his/her musical endeavors.

Tracy E. Leenman earned her Bachelor of Music and Master of Music degrees in music education from Syracuse University. She has nearly 40 years' teaching experience, and 15+ years' experience in the music industry. She has won several national awards for her work in music advocacy, including the 2009 KEYS Program Keeping the Beat Music Advocacy Award, the 2009 SCMEA Friend of Music Business Award, and the 2006 Phi Beta Mu (Theta Chapter) Outstanding Contributor Award. A noted author and clinician, she is widely respected for her work with educators, students, musicians, instrument manufacturers and retailers. She can be reached at tracy@musicalinnovations.biz.